

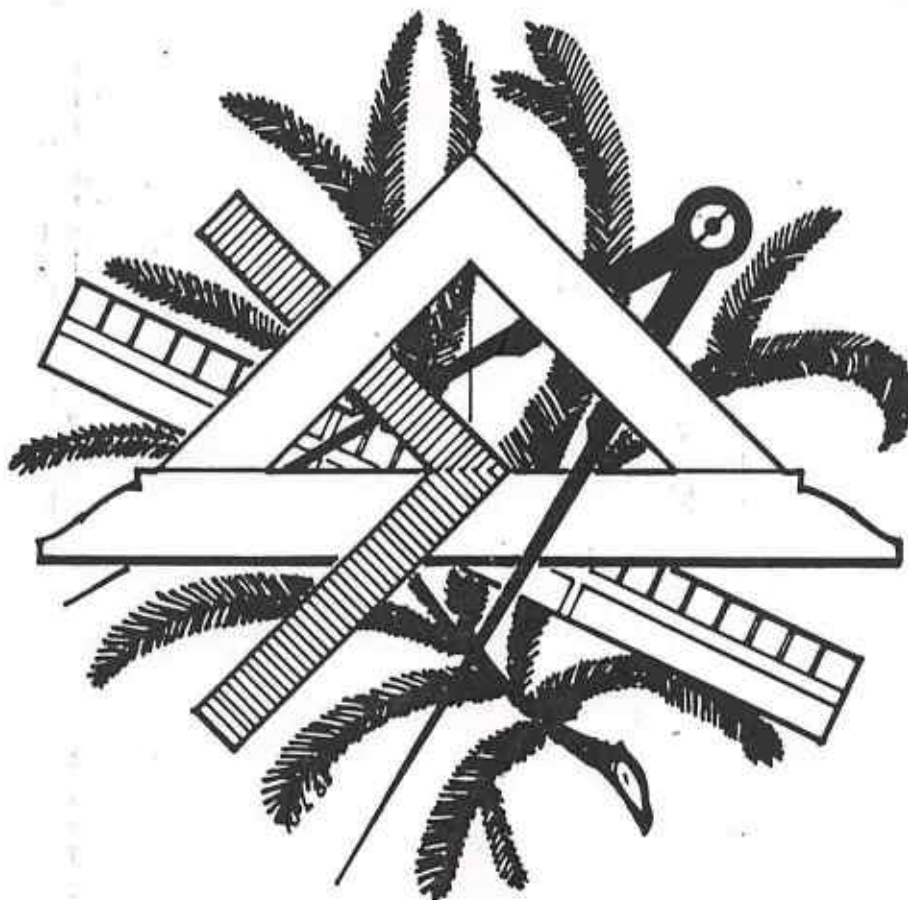
John Hawkins Rountree

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JOHN HAWKINS ROUNTREE
:A Mason, Pioneer and Founding Father

The history of Wisconsin is the story of the lives of the people that shaped the territory and the state from the wilderness. These individuals arrived by foot, horseback, canoe, river boat and ox cart. There were no roads, motels or restaurants. Laws were only as good as the honor and persuasive power of the individuals involved. John Hawkins Rountree helped form the City of Platteville, the Territory of Wisconsin and the State of Wisconsin. He also was instrumental in beginning the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin and the State University System.

Randall Rountree, John's great-grandfather, settled in Virginia from Ireland in 1720. In 1795, Thomas Rountree, his grandfather moved to Warren County, Kentucky near Mammoth Cave. His father, John Rountree, lived his entire life in this same location. John Hawkins Rountree was born March 24, 1805. Rountree described his own education as a "very common-school." The school house was one of those primitive constructions of unhewn logs with holes cut for windows while a broad fireplace with its huge open chimney furnished the heat for the room.

In February of 1824 Rountree followed his older brother Hiram to Hillsboro, Montgomery County, Illinois. He was appointed a deputy sheriff until he won the election for sheriff and was installed September 1, 1826. On December 19, 1826, Illinois Governor Ninian Edwards appointed Rountree a major in the Montgomery County Battalion of Militia. From this time on he was known as Major Rountree.

Answering the call of exploration with several other men, Rountree joined an expedition to the area that is now southwestern Wisconsin. In his own words; "On the 24th of May, 1827, I reached the lead region in company with Honorables Horace McCartney, and John Terry, having traveled by ox team from Hillsboro, Montgomery County, Illinois. In April we arrived somewhere between White Oak Springs and New Diggings."

"After traveling some distance on foot with Alexander Gray, who was one of my traveling companions from Montgomery County, Illinois, and occasionally digging what was then called a sucker-hole in search for lead ore over the county about New Diggings, Gratiot Grove, Shullsburg, Elk Grove, without finding any mineral for the balance of the month May, and all of June and the first three days of July, on the morning of the 4th of July, 1827, we concluded to visit the Mounds (called the Platte Mounds), and as it was a beautiful, clear, bright day, we could have a fine view of the surrounding country and spent our nation's 51st birthday on the most

commanding position that we had ever seen. From there we travelled North along that beautiful prairie country to where Wingville was afterwards settled and located. Then turning West we travelled on what was afterwards called the Military Ridge to a point in the vicinity of where Mount Ida is located where we met three wagons drawn by ox teams and one half dozen women, one lady, Mrs. Thomas with her husband and two children. They were all fleeing to Galena for protection from the Indians. These people had a few weeks before stopped at or near what is now Beetown to search for lead, there having been a lead discovery called the Bee Lead Prospect a short time before near that place."

John Rountree and his partner, J. B. Campbell continued on to the Platte River where Emanuel Metcalf, a trapper had discovered lead mineral thrown out of a badger hole. They purchased the claim and began mining. The claim proved to be productive yielding \$30,000 in a year. In November of 1827 Rountree resigned as sheriff and major of the militia in Montgomery County to continue his mining. Campbell and Rountree spent the winter of 1827 in a 12 by 12 foot sod hut on the Rountree Branch of the Platte River near their claim. It is believed they also constructed a smelter on this same site.

In the spring of 1828 they were joined by James R. Vineyard, F. Reemer and George Rosemeyer who also staked their own claims. Frederick G. Hollman, his wife and 4 children arrived a short time later to begin farming and mining. A log cabin had been started for the Hollmans, but it was not finished. Rountree and Campbell provided suitable housing in their cabin for the first woman in Platteville until the Hollman cabin could be finished. In July of 1828, Rountree petitioned Strangers' Union Lodge No. 14 in Galena, Illinois for the masonic degrees. He received his degrees that same summer. On August 7, 1828 Rountree married Miss Mary Grace Mitchell, the daughter of Reverend and Mrs. Samuel Mitchell of Galena. The next day the newlyweds moved into a log cabin in Platteville. They were to have 3 children before Mary Rountree died October 16, 1837. By the fall of 1828 Rountree and Campbell had started a store to meet the needs of the miners and settlers. The first election was held that same year with Frederick Hollman being elected town clerk.

During the winter of 1828 the US Postal Service was petitioned for a post office. Rountree was named the first postmaster in the summer of 1829, a position he held several times until 1859. The first constituted judicial system in the Platteville area was established in 1829 by the Governor of the Territory of Michigan. Despite having no legal training, Rountree was appointed Justice of the Peace for Iowa County, which

included Grant, LaFayette, Green and part of Rock and Dane Counties. This appointment was made in recognition of Rountree's ability to arbitrate disputes and help those involved reach compromises. An example is found in a dispute between Frederick Hollman and a Mr. Cunningham over rights to the profit from a lead mine in 1831. In Hollmans own words; "I engaged a young man by the name of Cunningham. I was to board him and do half the work, and he was to receive one-third of the mineral raised. He worked eight or ten days, and left without saying a word. After my partner returned, Cunningham came back, and claimed that he was entitled to one-third of the diggings. ... However, in good nature, I told Cunningham the matter could be easily determined, according to our mining rules, by arbitration. 'I will have no arbitration', said Cunningham; 'no one can prevent me from having my rights.' " After consulting the mining agent in Galena, Hollman returned with a sealed opinion of the mining agent to be given to the arbitrators.

"I went at once to J. R. Vineyard, to get him to read the order of the agent to Cunningham. Cunningham still insisted that he would not arbitrate. Mr. Vineyard gave him a final warning: 'As a friend of mine, I warn you not to go near the mine. If you do, you are a dead man. Mr. Hollman is a peaceable man, but on this he is very determined, and he is strongly armed.'

"Cunningham went to Rountree's store, where the matter was discussed. One observed, 'Cunningham may kill Hollman, and he will be hanged, because he defied the order of the mining agent. On the other side, Hollman may kill Cunningham, and he will be cleared, as justified.'

"The following morning I went with my partner to the diggings. I kept the pistol, and gave my partner the double-barreled gun. Our arrangements were to shoot Cunningham if he came nearer than a certain point. We both sat near the windlass. We saw a man approaching whom we thought to be Cunningham, but it proved to be Mr. Rountree, who came with a message from Cunningham."

"Mr. Rountree gave Cunningham's offer of a compromise, which was that he would relinquish all claim to the diggings for twenty-five dollars. We were delighted to pay the twenty-five dollars, though Cunningham had no claim upon the mine. We gave thanks to Major Rountree, and told him that we would as cheerfully have paid two hundred dollars, for we were determined to kill Cunningham if he had come to the mine. Major Rountree had saved us from killing a man by making arrangements for us to pay twenty-five dollars."

In the spring of 1832 John Rountree and his wife along with William

B. Vineyard and his wife formed a Methodist class, the first in Grant County. Reverend Smith L. Robinson preached a few times until the Black Hawk War when he left the mining region. Reverend John Mitchell replaced him in the fall of 1832. Platteville soon became a stop on a circuit for several other Methodist Episcopal preachers.

The Black Hawk War caused a mild hysteria in Platteville and the surrounding countryside. The residents of Platteville erected a blockhouse and formed a company of mounted volunteers from the miners and settlers of the area. Rountree was elected captain of this unit. The unit saw very limited action. They rode to Blue Mounds to determine if the Winnebago Indians would remain neutral. With the close of the war, Frederick Hollman returned home to mounting bills and much raw ore to convert to pig lead. It is reported Rountree loaned him, rent free, the use of his smelter and 200,000 pounds of pig lead were prepared for market.

Governor Cass of the Territory of Michigan again named Rountree Chief Justice of Iowa County in 1834. He held this position until Michigan became a state in 1836 and the Territory of Wisconsin was formed. The next year Grant County was formed and Rountree was appointed the first probate judge.

In 1833 the Platteville area was surveyed and purchased from the Indians. Rountree, Carls and Vineyard purchased Section 15 of Township 3 North, Range 1 West of the Fourth Prime Meridian which is the location of Platteville today in 1834. These men represented all the other settlers and miners in this purchase to prevent land speculators from interfering. Rountree had 36 acres surveyed and laid out in 19 lots which was to become the City of Platteville. John Rountree placed an advertisement in the North Western Gazette and Galena Advertiser on September 19, 1835 which read as follows:

"The subscriber has laid out a new Town at Platteville, In Iowa County, Michigan Territory.

Platteville is handsomely situated on the border of the Prairie, in a grove that connects with the extensive Forest on the Platte Rivers; and is 24 miles North of Galena, 18 miles South-west of Mineral Point, and 12 miles East of the Mississippi; on the main Stage road from Galena to Prairie Du Chien.

The surrounding country is inferior to none, in fertility of soil, and adaptedness to agriculture. The timber on the Platte rivers, is of excellent quality, and abundant; and very convenient to the farming land on the Prairie; the little Platte, which runs within a mile and a half of the Town, is a valuable Mill stream, affording fine falls in various places for

mill sites, and a sufficient volume of water at all seasons of the year, to carry extensive Machinery; a Saw mill is already in operation on this stream, 3 miles below Platteville, and another a few miles above Springs and streams of purest water abound in every part of the contiguous Country. In addition to those advantages, it may be safely affirmed that the mineral wealth of this region is equal to that of any other portion of the Mining District; attracted by such inducements, an industrious, intelligent and moral population is settling and improving the country rapidly, and purchasing the lands as they come into market.

Persons wishing to purchase property, and settle in the Territory; would do well to explore this section of Country, before purchasing."

In 1838 Major Rountree was elected to a four year term as a member of the Territorial Council. The first meeting of the Territorial Legislature was held in Belmont, a few miles northeast of Platteville. Governor Henry Dodge commissioned Rountree an aid with the rank of Colonel in 1839. A bitter and clandestine search for the permanent location of the state capital occupied the territorial legislature during its first meetings. No hint of this scandal was ever traced to Governor Dodge or his aides.

A rapid growth period followed in Platteville. Rountree entered into a partnership with Noah Virgin and Neeley Gray to build a grist mill to accomodate area farmers. It was determined in 1836 that the community needed a larger meeting place for the Methodist Episcopal Church. Reverend Samuel Mitchell succeeded in raising a large portion of the necessary funds over a two year span. In January of 1839 John Rountree deeded to the trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church a lot on the condition that the basement of the church building should be used for a school. A frame structure, 30 by 40 feet, capable of seating 300 persons was erected. The building is reported to have been used by many other religious groups in the early stages of their growth in Platteville. Records show Rountree donated property for several other religious faiths to build churches also.

Alvin M. Dixon an educator with a Master of Arts Degree from Illinois College and operator of a private school in Platteville proposed the development of a common school not only for Platteville, but the entire territory. A governing body was formed with John Rountree as president. A copy of this groups proposal was placed before the Territorial Council on February 14, 1839. On March 7, 1839 the legislature organized a system of public schools to be supported by taxation. The territorial legislature had already, in January of 1838 provided charters for 14 "seminaries", one "academy", two "colleges", and two "universities" - one

at Green Bay and the other the "University of the Territory of Wisconsin" at Madison. Rountree introduced legislation on February 20, 1839 which was passed and signed on March 1, 1839 "to incorporate the Platteville Academy in the County of Grant". Funding for the academy was to come through common stock and it was not until 1842 that classes were conducted.

John Rountree took as his second wife, Lydia H. Southworth of Clinton, New York on September 3, 1839. They had several children and nearly 50 years together before she died on June 16, 1881.

On February 11, 1842, at the end of the terms for the representatives to the first Territorial Legislature, James R. Vineyard shot and killed Charles Cotesworth Pinckney Arndt, a delegate from Brown County, in an altercation in the Capitol. Vineyard submitted his resignation from the legislature which was refused. He was then expelled by the Legislature and was tried for manslaughter before the chief justice of the Territory, being acquitted on the grounds of self-defense. John Rountree spoke as a character witness and as a witness to the incident.

In the fall of 1842, Benjamin T. Kavanaugh, a Methodist Episcopal Minister and a mason was appointed by the Rock River Conference to the Platteville District. Kavanaugh and Rountree enlisted the help of Brother Charles Gear of New Diggings who was a member of Far West Lodge in Galena. The following Masons met at the home of Dr. John Bevan: John H. Rountree, Benjamin T. Kavanaugh, Hugh R. Coulter, John Bevan, Rufus Spaulding, John W. Riley, L. W. Link, J. R. Vineyard, David Rich, William C. Fillebrown and Charles Gear. It was decided to form a lodge and request a charter from the Grand Lodge of Missouri through Far West Lodge. The Grand Lodge of Missouri granted a dispensation on January 10, 1843 and a charter was received on October 31, 1843. The Lodge was named Melody Lodge No. 65 after Henry Curzon Melody, Grand Lecturer of Missouri. Brother Rountree served the lodge as Senior Deacon the first year.

Mineral Point Lodge No. 49 had received its' charter from the Grand Lodge of Missouri on July 27, 1841. Milwaukee Lodge No. 22 received a dispensation on June 12, 1843 from the Grand Lodge of Illinois. At a meeting of Melody Lodge on November 1, 1843, Worshipful Master Kavanaugh introduced a resolution to form a committee to correspond with Mineral Point and Milwaukee Lodges seeking to hold a convention to form a Grand Lodge of Wisconsin. Representatives met on December 18, 1843 in Madison to form the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin. Melody Lodge members that were elected or appointed as Grand Lodge Officers included; Benjamin Kavanaugh, Grand Master, Benjamin C. Eastman, Grand Secretary, John H.

Rountree, Junior Grand Deacon, George W. Lakin, Grand Sword Bearer, J. L. Marsh Grand Steward and Rufus Spaulding Grand Chaplin. Rountree later served as Grand Treasurer in 1846 and as Grand Junior Warden in 1847. On July 2, 1844 a dispensation was issued from the General Grand Chapter of the United States, directed to Benjamin T. Kavanaugh, Moses Meeker, Marcus Wainwright, Ephraim F. Ogden, Thomas C. Legate, William R. Smith, Eleazer Smith, Hugh R. Colter and Charles Knight. Kavanaugh became High Priest, Meeker, King and Wainwright, Scribe. On September 13, 1844 the General Grand Chapter of the United States issued a charter to Washington Chapter, No. 2, Royal Arch Masons. On February 13, 1850 delegates from Milwaukee Chapter, No. 1, Washington Chapter, No. 2 and Southport Chapter, No. 3 met in Madison for the purpose of forming the Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons of Wisconsin. Rountree was a charter member and elected Grand King for the first year. For next five years, he was Grand Treasurer of the Grand Chapter. In 1861 Rountree was elected Grand High Priest. He joined the Order of Knights Templar in Madison in 1869. Major Rountree lived a notable masonic life covering a period of sixty-two years.

Rountree was re-elected to the Territorial Council in 1842. During the summer of 1843, the first brick building in the village of Platteville was erected by John Rountree. The building was later used as a post office. Starting in 1847 several attempts were made to build railroads in Southwest Wisconsin. Rountree was one of the charter member of the Milwaukee and Waukesha Railroad which later was known as the Milwaukee and Mississippi Railroad and a commissioner on other railroad projects. A rail line was finally completed to Platteville in 1870 due to the persistence of Rountree.

In 1847 he was elected a member of the second Constitutional Convention and served on the committee on General Provisions. Following the successful adoption of a constitution, the State of Wisconsin was admitted to the Union on May 29, 1848. John Rountree was elected to the state senate in 1850. The following year he was appointed a Regent of the State University. Records show he served 5 years even though his original term was for 2 years. These were difficult years to be a regent in that they were charged to establish a university system without control of money or land to accomplish their purpose.

In 1853, as a member of the Whig Party, he was appointed major-general of militia of the Second District of Wisconsin by the Democratic Governor Dewey. He was elected a member of the the assembly in 1863 and was again elected to the state senate in 1866. These were important

positions during a time when the state was preparing for war and healing the wounds following the war. Rountree was instrumental in erecting a soldiers' monument near the court house in Lancaster. On July 4, 1867 the monument was dedicated and a memorial service to honor the fallen soldiers held. At the same time Rountree was fulfilling his responsibilities at the state level, he also served as a member of the Board of Supervisors for Grand County a total of 6 times from 1850 until 1872.

In 1854 Rountree built a brick home which was restored in 1945 and used by the university in Platteville as a home for its' president. A reception was given for Ulysses S. Grant at the home in 1878 following his presidency.

On March 2, 1857 the Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company was formed by an act of the state legislature. Rountree was a charter member and elected to the first board of trustees. In 1859 the company was moved to Milwaukee from Janesville in a leather covered trunk. One by one the original trustees were dropped at annual elections, until in 1862 Rountree was the only charter member on the Board of Trustees. He continued to hold this position for a total of 33 years until his death. From a low point of borrowing \$1500 to pay a death claim, the company grew to have assets of \$37,000,000 in 1890.

Early in the history of Platteville it became necessary for a place to bury the dead. Rountree and N. H. Virgin provided the land for the first cemetery. This proved adequate until about 1850 when the need for more room forced the formation of the Platteville Cemetery Association. The original cemetery was given to the city with the stipulation that it receive perpetual care.

In 1877 a larger Methodist Church was again needed. Reverend Case, John Rountree and John Grindell were appointed as a building committee. The cornerstone was laid in July of 1877 with a meeting room prepared for services through the winter. The dedication of the building took place on Thanksgiving Day 1878. Three of the seven stained glass windows were given by John Rountree in the memory of Mary Grace Rountree, Reverend Samuel Mitchell, and his wife Eleanor.

As Rountree approached 80 years of age, he withdrew from public service to care for his domestic duties and personal business. He enjoyed walking the streets of Platteville and greeting friends and visitors.

As a summary of Rountree's life, part of a biography sketch from the Biographical Record of the counties of Rock, Green, Grant, Iowa and Lafayette is quoted. "When he first entered the present State it was

divided into two counties, and contained but a few thousand inhabitants, scattered over the vast territory; to-day it numbers its inhabitants by hundreds of thousands.

Major Rountree was the witness of the growth of a new empire; took part in an Indian War; saw the aboriginal inhabitants pushed back, foot by foot, until they now possess hardly a rod of land which they can call their own. He saw the commencement, growth and prosperity or obliteration of every city and village, with the exception of two or three military posts, in the State - all the improvements, indeed, that in fifty years have converted a great and uncivilized wilderness into a series of powerful states.

In the immediate vicinity of his own home the change has been no less great; in place of the rude miner's cabin is seen the stately mansion; the few hundred seekers after mineral have been swallowed up in the many thousands whose cozy farm houses dot the landscape in every direction. General Rountree may well have been regarded as a landmark between the past and the present, one who lived over the whole term of our local history, and served as a prominent factor in making it.

The end of life came to this venerable pioneer June 30, 1890. The funeral service was held under the auspices of the Masonic fraternity, of which he had so long been an honored member. Brethren of the order and many friends from different parts of the state assembled to pay tribute to his memory, the crowd being so great that the services were held in the beautiful park which surrounds the Rountree home. Six of his children survived him: Mrs. Ellen R. Jewett, of Chicago; Mrs. Laura R. Smith, who with her two daughters lives in the old homestead; Mrs. Cora Hathaway, of New York; and Miss Lilly T. Rountree, Philip S. Rountree and Harrison H. Rountree, who all live in Chicago.

For John Hawkins Rountree masonry was a style or philosophy of life that he lived. He was in continual service to his fellow creatures. His home was always open to the traveler. His motives in his business decisions were to help his neighbor and not personal wealth. All religious congregations could depend on Rountree for land or financial support. Every level of education received his tireless support. John Rountree was looked to for leadership in all situations. His ability to deal with those in conflict and help them reach a compromise attest to his honesty and integrity. It can truly be said about John Rountree, well done good and faithful servant.

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