

The following article is found in the Biltmore Lodge History. The reason I send this to you now is that the trail date mentioned is September 7, 1893, 132 years ago.

## ALL MASONS AREN'T SAINTS - THE STORY OF OB WHEELER, JR.

This article came about quite by accident. While perusing the lodge records from the early 1890's the name O. B. Wheeler, Jr. was mentioned. Not an odd name but one that caught the attention of this writer. The name and date led me to the Internet. What I discovered was at the very least, interesting.

One of the first priorities for Biltmore Estate's planners was obtaining a steady supply of building materials. In 1890, Richard Morris Hunt, sent brick manufacturer O. B. Wheeler, Jr. to Asheville to inspect clay pits on the Biltmore Estate. The clay proved to be good, so Vanderbilt established a brick and tile manufactory on the outskirts of Biltmore Village that by 1891 produced on average 38,000 bricks per day for use in construction.

Wheeler, from New York, was an obvious choice for the project for it would seem he had much experience in the manufacturing of clay based products. He owned land in an area known as Oakland Valley which is a few miles north, north-west of New York City. On the land was a deposit of mottled blue clay used for making flower pots. As an outgrowth of his brick business Wheeler invented a process of laminating brick with porcelain which netted him a nice sum of money. His land and business were also near his home lodge of Port Jervis Lodge No. 328.

Wheeler arrived in Biltmore Village prior to March 1891, most probably in 1890. One would assume that he immediately sought the fraternal bonds of Freemasonry and forthwith began to visit Mt. Hermon Lodge No.118 as evidence may show. At the first communication of Biltmore Lodge No. 446 under Dispensation on March 24, 1891 Wheeler's name is listed among the charter members. The other charter members listed were all members of Mt. Hermon Lodge (hence the evidence). From this date until 1893 his name is seen recorded in the minutes quite often. Then, found in the minutes of August 1, 1893 is this entry:

*Motion made by Bro. J. M. Brookshire and second by Bro. Howard that a committee be appointed to investigate the reports concerning Bro. O B Wheeler, Jr. and report back at our next regular meeting. Committee, D B Nelson, A S Whitaker, J H Burrage.*

My interest peaked as I read on into the minutes of August 15.

*Motion by Bro. George Davis second by Bro J H Burrage that Bro O B Wheeler, Jr be tried under the charges brought by the committee. The WM designated the 1<sup>st</sup> Thursday night in September, being the 7<sup>th</sup>, for the trial giving him 10 days notice.*

*Bro. D B Nelson was appointed by the WM to act in behalf of the Lodge Secretary and instructed by the WM to furnish Bro O B Wheeler, Jr. with a copy of the charges brought against him by the Lodge.*

So, what did he do, I wondered. The Internet proved invaluable in quenching my curiosity. Two articles from the New York Times from 1893 provided the answer. I am not sure which article was published first. In one article we read where Wheeler attempted to cash in some Wall Street notes at a Chicago bank in the amount of \$103,000. He was arrested and arraigned. His attorney, according to the article was preparing a case based on an unstable mind. In all matters other than his business Wheeler seemed to be rational but when his profession was the topic he apparently began to show signs of severe stress. The article described the misfortunes of his company and the loss of wealth.

In the second article we find that Mr. George Vanderbilt had been robbed of \$16,000 by one of his employees. Apparently O. B. Wheeler, Jr. had several names on the payroll of the brick and tile manufactory of men who did not live in the Biltmore district. The factory manager discovered the ongoing embezzlement and subsequently alerted Vanderbilt who in turn filed suit in New York that placed a lien on Wheeler's Park National Bank account. Wheeler, finding that he had been discovered, offered to repay the embezzled funds but only \$6,000 was returned.

No further New York Times articles on this matter have been discovered nor, unfortunately, were the minutes of the Masonic trial. As his name was no longer found in the minutes after September 7, 1893, one would assume that he was found guilty and dropped from the rolls of Freemasonry.