

Printer, Patriot, Freemason

*Isaiah Thomas spreads
independence and Freemasonry*

It was the night of April 16, 1775, just a few days before the first shots of the American Revolution would be fired on the green in Lexington.

Under growing threats of retribution from the British forces occupying Boston, Isaiah Thomas (1749-1831) — printer, Freemason, and a radical Revolutionary patriot — sent his printing press and type cases on a boat that crossed the Charles River to Charlestown and which were then conveyed over land to Worcester, 40 miles to the west.

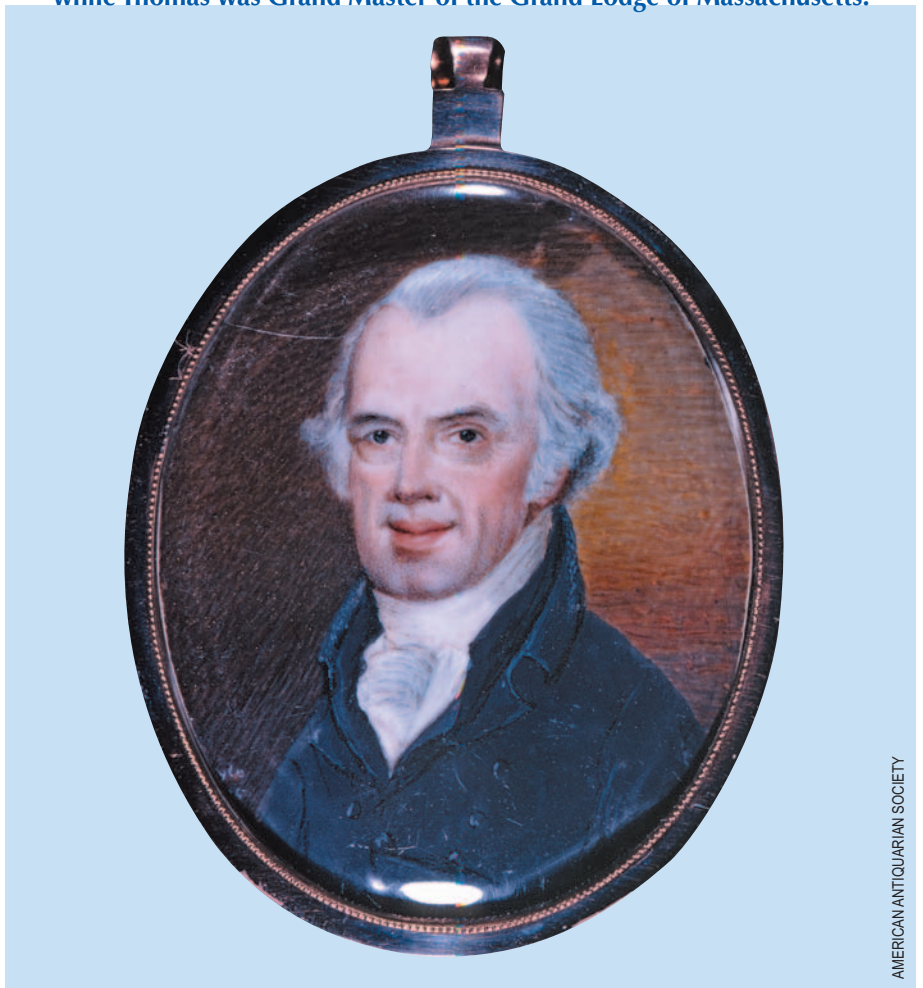
What remained in his print shop in Boston was either carried off or burned after he fled. Thomas had made himself, in his own words, “very obnoxious to the friends of the British administration.” He did this most publicly through articles in his incendiary newspaper, the *Massachusetts Spy*.

More covertly, he published handbills for the Sons of Liberty and was instrumental in spreading news throughout the colonies of British abuse of colonists. Thomas’ infamy among Loyalists was far-spread: he was burned in effigy as far south as North Carolina.

It was with the sound of early morning gunfire on the green in Lexington on April 19, 1775, that the American Revolution began in force. However, printers like Thomas were essential in laying the long foreground leading up to the actual battles of the Revolution.

The important role that Thomas’ newspaper played in the years leading

Portrait miniature of Isaiah Thomas, painted by William M.S. Doyle in 1805, while Thomas was Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts.



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up to and during the war cannot be understated. Newspapers such as Thomas’ not only disseminated news, but they also spread political ideas and propaganda. In his case these political ideas and propaganda were very

strongly in support of the cause for independence of the American colonies from the British.

The *Massachusetts Spy*, as with many newspapers of the time, was not prone to understatement. On May 3, 1775, less than three weeks after the battle of Lexington, Thomas printed the first issue of the *Spy* from his new office in Worces-



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ter and contained his version of the events of April 19.

To modern eyes, its opening lines sound less like reportage and more like a call to arms: “Americans! Forever bear in mind the *Battle of Lexington!* — where British troops, unmolested and unprovoked, wantonly, and in a most inhuman manner fired upon and killed a number of our countrymen, then robbed them of their provisions, ransacked, plundered and burnt their houses!”

The risk that Thomas faced by printing articles that criticized the British was quite real.

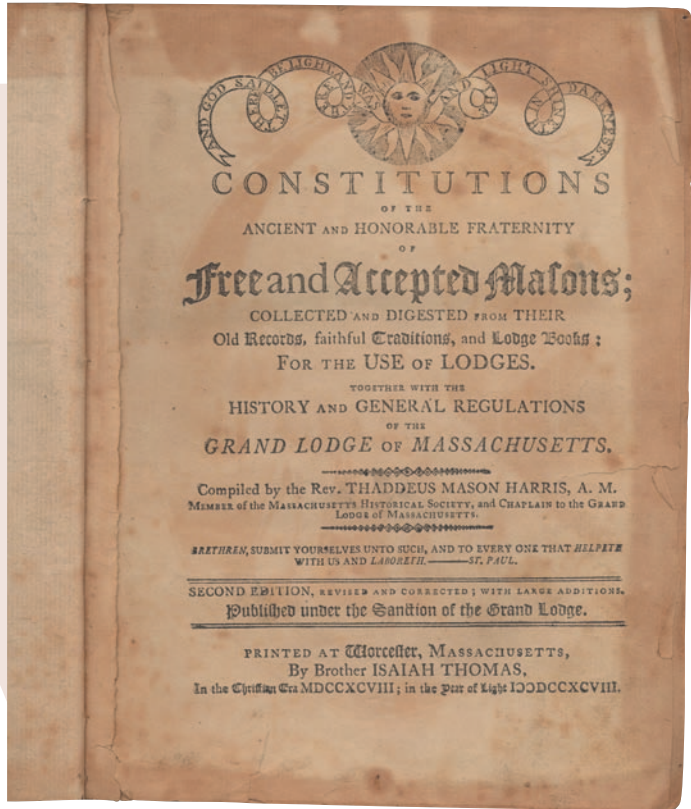
For example, Thomas recalled that on March 10, 1775, a man who (according to Thomas) had been framed by British officers for a crime he hadn’t committed, was tarred and feathered and paraded past Thomas’ printing office in Boston by British soldiers, some of the soldiers yelling “The printer of the *Spy* shall be the next to receive this punishment!”

Thomas, at least in retrospect, relished his role as an instigator. Years later he wrote that he “had the honor of being included with John Hancock and Samuel Adams in a list of twelve persons who were to be summarily executed when taken” by the British.

The story above may already be familiar to those interested in the American Revolution, the history of printing, or how the two overlap.

Yet to those interested in American Masonic history, Thomas is also an interesting figure. Indeed, in Thomas we can see how Freemasonry, the convictions of a revolutionary American patriot and a man who knew the power of

Title page of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts Book of Constitutions, printed by Isaiah Thomas in 1798.



the printed word, all meet in one person.

Although we often speak of Masonic history and American history as though they are two distinct categories, we know they are not. Freemasonry does not — and never did — exist in a vacuum. Among many other things, Thomas was a printer and a Freemason, and these two aspects of his life overlapped and no doubt influenced each other.

Thomas is of interest to the Van Gorden-Williams Library at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, MA, for a number of reasons.

In many ways Thomas can be seen as a reflection of the goals and focus of the library and archives. The institution collects and makes available to researchers materials pertaining to Masonic history and American history and culture, including works related to the American Revolution.

The Van Gorden-Williams Library collection contains some early and important books and pamphlets printed by Thomas that go far in illustrating his deep involvement with Masonry in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

We don’t know exactly when or with what lodge Thomas was made a Mason. Although probably not yet in the fraternity in 1775, Thomas was a friend or close associate of many of the well-

known revolutionaries at the time, many of whom were also members of the craft; men such as Paul Revere, John Hancock, and Joseph Warren.

The first lodge that we know Thomas was a member of, Trinity Lodge of Lancaster, Massachusetts, was chartered on January 30, 1778, by the Massachusetts Grand Lodge.

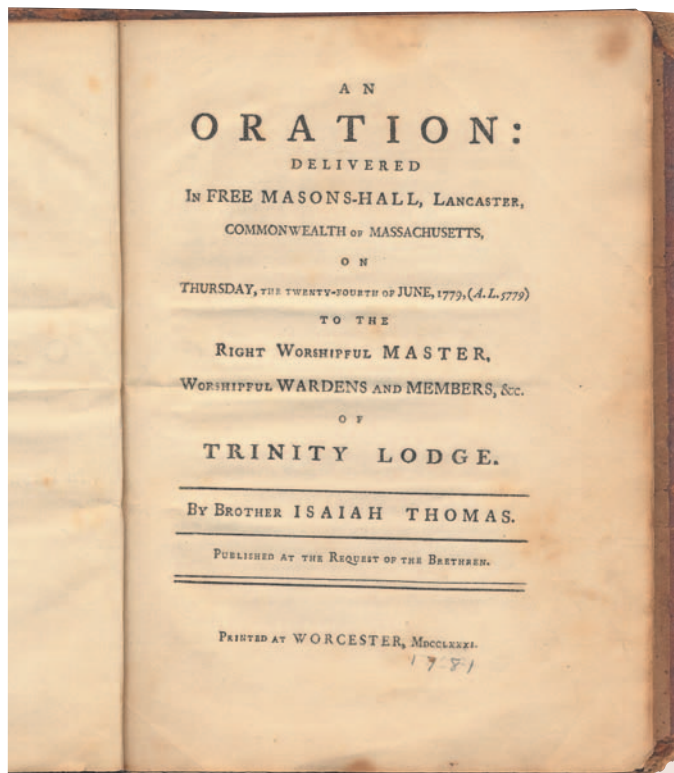
We know that Thomas was involved with this lodge shortly after it was chartered, since he published — *At the Unanimous Request of the Society* — a sermon delivered by Zabdiel Adams on June 24, 1778, entitled *Brotherly Love and Compassion, Described and Recommended*.

Pamphlets that reproduce speeches or sermons — mostly delivered for the Feast of St. John the Baptist — were the most common type of book printed by the fraternity during the period leading up to the American Revolution.

By 1779, it is clear that Thomas had been made a Mason, since we know that “Brother Isaiah Thomas” delivered a speech to the members of Trinity Lodge on June 24, 1779, at the Freemasons Hall in Lancaster.

Two years later, in 1781, “At the request of the Brethren,” Thomas published a speech called *An Oration: Delivered in Freemasons Hall, Lancaster, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, on Thursday, the Twenty-fourth of June, 1779* (A.L. 5779). ➤

All of the printed items mentioned in this article are in the collection of the Van Gorden-Williams Library, with the exception of the *Massachusetts Spy*, the sermon by Zabdiel Adams, and a sermon by Aaron Bancroft.



Title page of an oration, delivered by Isaiah Thomas in 1779, and printed in 1781.

► Although some have speculated that Thomas may have become a Mason as early as 1775, before leaving Boston, it seems likely that he joined sometime shortly before giving the speech in Lancaster in 1779. Thomas remained involved with Trinity Lodge until 1782, serving as Junior Warden in 1781 and 1782.

The year 1792 is important in the history of Massachusetts Freemasonry. Until that year, Freemasonry in Massachusetts operated under two separate Grand Lodges — Saint John’s Grand Lodge and the Massachusetts Grand Lodge.

This changed on March 19, 1792, when the two existing Grand Lodges met for the purpose of combining into one united Grand Lodge, to be called the Grand Lodge of the Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

A month later, a committee was formed “to consider and compile a book of Constitutions containing all things necessary for the use of the fraternity, . . . and the same be published under the sanction of the Grand Master.”

The Constitutions of the Ancient and Honourable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons was compiled by Thaddeus M. Harris and printed by Thomas in 1792. Six years later, in 1798, answer-

ing the Grand Lodge’s call for a revision of the Constitutions, a second edition was published.

On February 8, 1793, a group of men met at the United States Hotel in Worcester for the purpose of forming a lodge. At that meeting, Morning Star Lodge was formed, with Isaiah Thomas elected its first Master.

Four months later, on June 11, 1793, the newly united Grand Lodge of Massachusetts met in Worcester for the purpose of consecrating the Morning Star Lodge and installing its Master.

Among those present from the Grand Lodge were Thomas’ long-time associate, Paul Revere, who was a Past Grand Officer and would serve as the second Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts from 1794-97.

Aaron Bancroft, pastor of the Second Church in Worcester, delivered a sermon for the occasion, which was later printed by Thomas.

In 1795, the Rev. Bro. Thaddeus M. Harris, who was responsible for compiling the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts’ Constitutions that were published by Thomas in 1792, delivered a speech to the Grand Lodge on the feast of St. John the Baptist in 1795.

The speech was printed in a pamphlet by Thomas and sold at his bookstore. The pamphlet is entitled *A Charge, Delivered before the Officers and Members of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, on the Festival of St. John the Baptist, June 24th, A.L. 5795.*

Among the items in the Library’s collection is an eight-page pamphlet of the proceedings of the annual meeting of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, held in December 1804.

One of the activities that the proceedings reports is the unanimous reelection of “The Most Worshipful Isaiah Thomas, Esq.” as Grand Master.

At the end of 1802, Thomas had been elected as fifth Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, a position he would hold from 1803-05, and again in 1809.

Although Thomas’s role in the early Grand Lodge is hardly forgotten, it is likely that today he might be more well remembered among the early Grand Masters of Massachusetts were it not for the fact that Paul Revere served as Grand Master from 1795-97.

As the sampling from the library’s collection above illustrates, Thomas produced a number of Masonic books and pamphlets, many of them important to the early printed history of Freemasonry in America.

The majority of his publications, however, were not Masonic. Other books that Thomas published include almanacs, textbooks, music books, Bibles, and state histories.

The library’s collection includes some of these non-Masonic publications by Thomas which illustrate other interests of his that were concurrent with his Masonic activities.

In 1793, Thomas co-published Samuel Williams’ *The Natural and Civil History of Vermont*, which was the first book dedicated to the subject of Vermont’s past ever published. In 1791, Thomas co-published volume two of Jeremy Belknap’s *The History of New Hampshire*.

Both Thomas and Belknap would go on to play significant roles in preserving American history, with Belknap as the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1791, and Thomas as the founder of the American Antiquarian Society in 1812.

Among his many accomplishments, Thomas’ formation of the Society stands as his lasting contribution to American culture.

