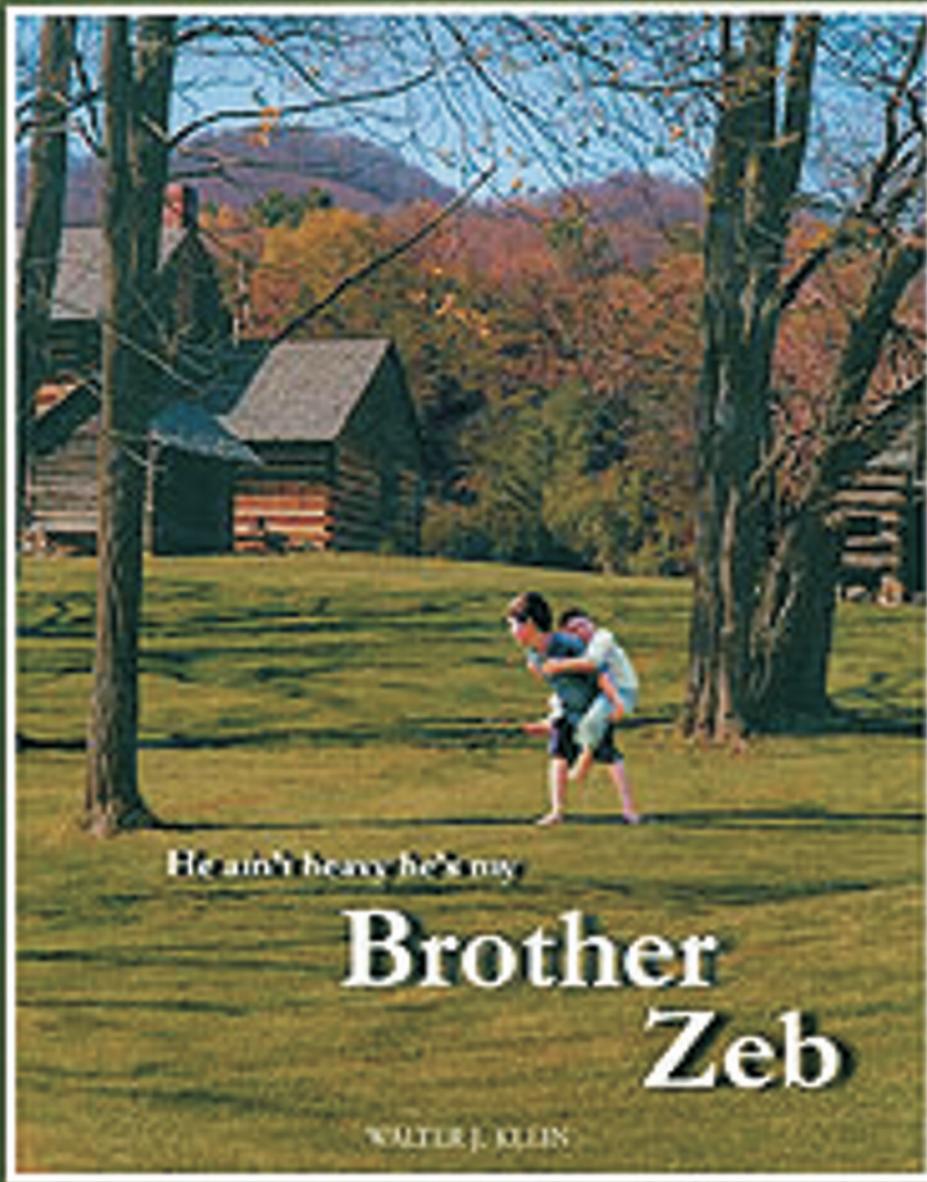


# WILKERSON COLLEGE LODGE NO. 760

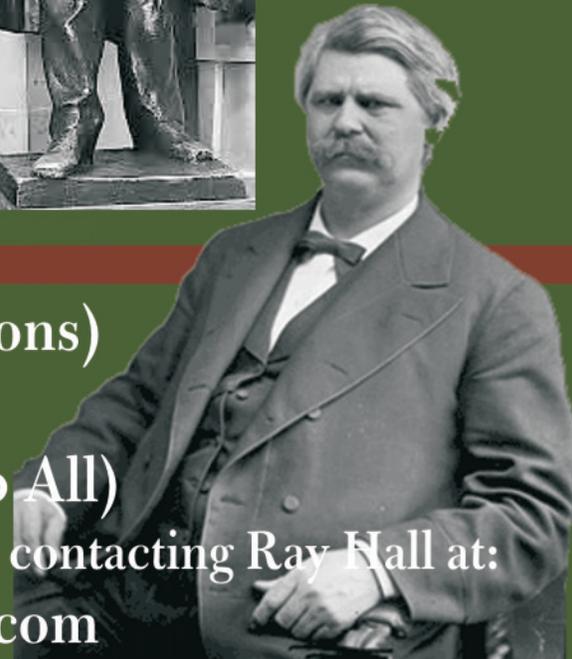
August 11 at Pilot Lodge # 493  
Pilot Mountain, NC



Walter Klein

PRESENTS

*"He aint heavy, he's my  
Brother Zeb"*



Lodge Opens at 11:00 AM (Master Masons)  
Lunch at 12:00 PM (Open to All)  
"Brother Zeb" following lunch (Open to All)  
Reservations are requested and can be made by contacting Ray Hall at:  
(336) 292-4633 or [secy76@yahoo.com](mailto:secy76@yahoo.com)

**“He ain’t heavy, he’s my Brother Zeb”**  
by Walter J. Klein

Heroes.

Masonry is where you find heroes, past, present and future. Hundreds of great world leaders. All through history. George Washington. Your own coach who walked you through your catechism. Heroes all.

Our son Richard is past master of Excelsior 261. After three girls his wife presented him with his first son. He wanted to name him Vance in honor of the man in history he admired most.

Neither he nor I ever heard Zeb Vance was a Mason. Not until Jody Howard called me. The teenage son of an Asheville past master, Jody was writing a high school thesis about three unusual Charlotte men: a Presbyterian minister, a Jewish merchant and a mountain lawyer. Jody had read my articles in his father’s *Scottish Rite Journal*. He saw me as a possible resource. After all, I was a Mason, historian, Jewish and an alumnus of UNC Chapel Hill. Through his Dad and his inquisitive ways Jody had discovered Zeb Vance to have been a Mason. He shared his proof with me – smoking gun documents from Mount Vernon 118 and articles from the *Asheville Citizen Times* about Vance’s burial with 120 Masons attending.

Jody was not a Mason yet but, like Zeb Vance, he was driven to become one. He and I associated for many pleasant months on his thesis and on an article that we did for the *Scottish Rite Journal*. We were sixty years apart in age – still are – but only inches apart in our passion for this wonderful subject. We’ve met only once. He’s a seminary student in Sewanee, Tennessee, and I’m – I’m right here to tell you some wild and wondrous things about Zeb Vance as a Mason.

Zeb was a genius who hid his brilliance behind jokes and plain speaking. He mastered 500 classic books willed him by his uncle, a young doctor killed in a duel. Zeb knew his Latin and named Excelsior Lodge when it was formed in 1867. But he didn’t care for anyone to know what a scholar he was until he was in court. There he slaughtered the opposition.

His profession was law. He borrowed tuition from UNC President David Swain, a leading Mason, and spent one sensational year at Chapel Hill for his complete college law education.

His mother and father both came from eminent civic and Masonic families. Famed leaders visited his home when he was still a child. He stunned them with his wit and wisdom. When he was 12 years old he told a friend he knew in his heart he would become governor of North Carolina. He did just that three times.

What about his Masonry? Well, get ready. When he was 23 he petitioned Mount Hermon 118 in Asheville. Within five months he was a Master Mason serving as Junior Deacon protem. Six months later he raised his brother Bob Vance and was representing his lodge before the Grand Lodge. By 1855 he was Junior Deacon revising the bylaws. That same year he made a speech at the Republican *National* Convention in Salisbury that led US Senator George Badger to shout that Vance was the “greatest stump speaker there ever was!”

The year 1858 saw Zeb as Senior Deacon of Mount Hermon, the highest Masonic office he ever held. Meanwhile his brother Bob was on his way to becoming NC Grand Master of Masons.

Zeb remained active and committed to the fraternity as he rose to become governor, Confederate colonel and US senator. He was asked to represent major and minor interests of various NC lodges in state and national governing bodies. He championed appropriations for Oxford Home and repayment of Civil War damages to St. John’s lodge 3 in New Bern.

Perhaps the climax of Zeb’s Masonic career came August 3, 1881, when he was guest speaker at the unveiling of a monument to Governor Richard Caswell in Kinston. Zeb was there as a Mason to honor another Mason and the whole world knew it. How many people came to little Kinston to see and hear him? *Twelve thousand!* That was a major portion of the state’s population in 1881.

How did it happen that Zeb Vance’s Masonry was lost in time? For one thing, none of his many biographers was a Mason. All of them skipped over his fraternal affiliation when they researched their books. In time, Vance schools, Vance streets, and Vance buildings were torn down and replaced.

But when he was living, Vance was *magic*. They say his portraits hung in every home in North Carolina. When he attended lodge, crowds of Masons packed the hall. When he stood to speak, he made history. When he was in court in Charlotte, all businesses closed so the population could witness Zeb in action. Hundreds of watermelons were consumed in the Charlotte courthouse when Zeb tried a case.

Here is a direct quote from “Tar Heels Track the Century” by Pocahontas Wight Edmunds that will illustrate Vance’s power when he spoke. “When the US Senate was considering an appropriation for his own French Broad River, the stream of his boyhood, which rises near the South Carolina border and meanders northward and westward, cleaving through high mountains on either side and bounding over boulders... Zeb became annoyed at Yankee criticism. The obstacle to the dredging appropriation was a senator from Rhode Island, who made the mistake of belittling the beautiful French Broad, the pride of every western North Carolinian. It was a small stream indeed alongside such navigable rivers as the Hudson and the Delaware, but scarcely the trick the New Englander claimed when he said that he could stand on the bank and *spit* halfway across it. Vance in truth had not favored the appropriation, or others of the pork

barrel type. It had been introduced by the US House by his own brother Bob, a congressman representing the western North Carolina district. But Zeb was unwilling to have his beloved French Broad degraded by anyone and went to its defense. He rose half in drollery, but with a touch of irritation, to take advantage of the opening.

“The gentleman who makes that remark about the French Broad comes from the puny state of Rhode Island. Why I could stand on one border of Rhode Island and pee halfway across the state.” (Rap gavel)

“Order! Order!” shouted the presiding officer. “The gentleman from North Carolina is out of order!”

“Yes,” Vance blandly continued, “and if I *wasn't* out of order, I could pee clear across his whole damned state!” You will notice in my book that the word Zeb used was not precisely *pee*.

When I told this story several nights ago to about sixty brethren in the lodge, I started rapping my trusty gavel and when I reached the third rap, everyone stood up!

\* \* \*

OK, now let's roll up our sleeves and look at Brother Zeb at his worst. An old definition says that a statesman is simply a dead politician. Zeb was surely the ultimate politician in his time; his advocates and detractors agreed on that. Zeb's chosen profession was law. He loved law and respected it. But it's no secret that it's a struggle to make a living as a lawyer. It was true then as now. Vance was never wealthy; never wanted to be. But holding public office offered him power and influence, and that suited him just fine.

He held his first public office in Asheville when he was only 20. He never quit the political life. Opportunities to cash in were everywhere but Zeb would not touch them. He was scrupulously honest and everyone knew it.

Was he ambitious? For political office, absolutely. For high Masonic office? Never. For titles and praise in the church? Never. For improperly favoring his family? Not for a moment. He loved to win, but never gambled. He would not take a position against liquor, saying his conscious was dry but his stomach wet. Yet there is not one story about him ever drinking to excess.

Was he unfaithful? Never. He adored his Hattie in a long and happy marriage with five sons. After her death, Zeb was devoted to his second wife Florence.

Did he dirty the linen of political parties? Hardly. In his time he was Republican, Democrat, Whig, you name it. He didn't follow parties, they followed him. And speaking of leadership, he kept ahead of the people of North Carolina throughout his 64 years.

Did he like being the center of attention? Bet on that. At lodge meetings he liked to smile with the brethren when the words were said, “*Advance* and communicate it.” He liked being introduced, mainly because that opened the doors to funny stories. Here’s an authentic favorite.

Some US senators, their wives and other ladies went on an outing in Chesapeake Bay. They had to climb a ladder to board the vessel. Zeb happened to glance up just as the lady ahead of him looked down and saw that he had a view beneath her skirts. “Senator,” she admonished. “I can see that you are no gentleman.” Zeb shot back, “I beg your pardon, madam, but I see that you aren’t either.”

Well, where are the black marks against Zebulon Baird Vance?

Black indeed.

His relations with the black race were worse than his spelling. He was determined to connect his beloved mountains by railroad and finally did it, but only at the expense of many black men. He ordered prisoners by the hundreds to build that railroad. Hundreds died or lived in utter misery. His remarks about black people in the state legislature were nothing short of disgusting. He told jokes about black people freely. It was known that he had been hand picked as Jefferson Davis’ successor as president of the Confederate States of America. So you know where he stood on slavery. He shamelessly gerrymandered blacks out of their voting power by creating a new county called Vance, which his critics called his “black baby.”

And yet...and yet...

Vance fought for and got a normal school for black teachers so North Carolina blacks could have equal educational opportunities, even to insisting that the head of that teachers college be black. He welcomed invitations to talk to black audiences and charged them with taking leadership responsibilities and seeking ways to distinguish their race.

And when Zeb’s dead body was transported from Washington to Asheville, countless blacks assembled along the railroad tracks to sing spirituals and pray for the soul of their dead friend. I guess the black people of the time thought Zeb Vance was not only the best thing they had going for them, but a decent human being who was, underneath it all, their friend.

Did you know that Zeb Vance was buried three times, and not one time with Masonic rites? His second wife refused to allow the Masonic team to perform the rites they had rehearsed at Mount Hermon 118. Later she secretly had her husband exhumed and reburied in her Martin family’s plot nearby at Riverside Cemetery. When Zeb’s sons found out, they took their stepmother to court, got a judgment, had their Dad dug up again and reburied him where he started out. I figure Zeb is still exploding with laughter at the thought that even in death he was a traveling man.

In the new book, *Brother Zeb*, you will discover much more adventure and many surprises, such as the several duels fought by famous North Carolina Masons... what happened to Zeb's five sons... the identity of Vance's seven heroes... the brother Mason who became Zeb's enemy who died in disgrace... how Zeb's mother and UNC President David Swain were once sweethearts...

After you have read it, you will surely understand the complete human being named Zeb Vance. You will finally appreciate how he used his sense of humor to lead his people. You will see how he nobly championed North Carolina through its worst history – tremendous numbers of war dead and injured, poverty beyond belief, hopelessness, ruin. You will, in the end, ask yourself what kind of man would tell jokes to a divided America that had suffered almost 800 thousand war casualties. How could Zebulon Baird Vance make a career of leading a poor agricultural state in the hardest of times and feed his hungry people funny stories?

You will find the answer within the very people he served. *The dearly loved this man who could help them smile through their tears.*

I must end now. But the memory of Zeb Vance should not, must not end. The most popular and beloved man and Mason in North Carolina history must not be forgotten. Let us honor him by naming that new road Vance road, this new school Vance school, that new lodge Vance lodge. Put his portrait back on the walls of public buildings. Ask teachers to challenge their students to write Zeb Vance biographies. Retell his great stories. Keep naming babies for him. We are literally obligated to keep this great Mason alive! After all, *you and I are his surviving brethren!*