



The Enigmatic Life of Major John Belli

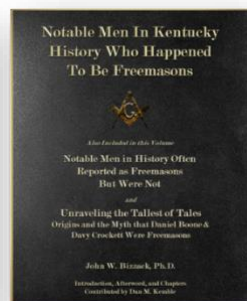
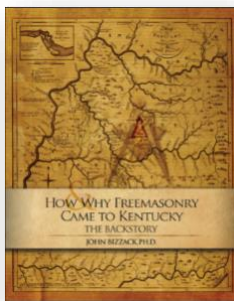
Merchant, Soldier, Spy and Freemason

John W. Bizzack, Ph.D.

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BSF Foundation, Lexington, Kentucky



The Enigmatic Life of Major John Belli

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John W. Bizzack

Had it not been for one sentence appearing in the first published history of Lexington Lodge No. 1 in 1913, John Belli would be but a mere footnote in the history of the first Masonic Lodge in Kentucky.

One-thousand copies of J.W. Norwood's *Concise History of Lexington Lodge No. 1, F & A.M. – Showing, Without Rhetorical Fog, The Spirit of the Work in Lexington for the Past Century and a Quarter.*

Norwood, a historian, and Junior Warden of the lodge at the time, coordinated a three-year effort to collect records and images of the 125 years of history of the lodge. Although assisted by others, he is considered the author. One-hundred and eleven years later, only three original copies of the publication are known to exist.

In the book, John Belli is referred to once and only as a “secret agent for Washington in the Indian campaigns of Bro. Anthony Wayne.”

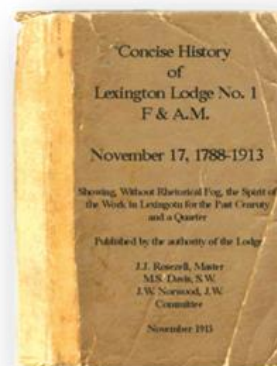
The discovery of the publication in 2013 filled in many blanks about the history of the oldest Masonic lodge in Kentucky and its members. Norwood's note about Belli was passed over by those who later wrote other histories of the lodge. The likelihood is that those writers were not aware of the publication, so the “secret agent” assertion was left unexplored for a century.



J.W. Norwood

Norwood's interest in Belli stemmed from a document he discovered in the dusty records of Lexington Lodge No. 1 while compiling information for the 1913 publication. A few months after the lodge published the book, Norwood wrote a full-page story about Belli that appeared in the *Lexington Herald* newspaper noting that Belli lived up to his reputation as a “man of mystery,” thus making research into his life much more difficult.¹ Certain periods of Belli's life were indeed mysterious. Today, learning about the influential role Belli played in the struggle for

Kentucky statehood, and his close friendship with many of the early notable men in America and in the Kentucky territory, identifies him as an important, although shadowy, figure.



Belli “acquired a confidence of all with whom he became acquainted and retained it, and this extended to his business acquaintances. Those men include George Washington, Secretary of War Henry Knox, John Jay, General Anthony Wayne, Isaac Shelby, the first governor of Kentucky, and Ohio's governor, Edward Tiffin [sic].”² Those names represent the short list.

¹ J.W. Norwood, The Mystery of Major John Belli, "Lexington Herald, Sunday, V. 43, Issue 257, Section 4, Page 4, September 14, 1913.

² The Old Northwest Genealogical Society, Cincinnati History Library and Archives Cincinnati Museum, Center, Columbus, Ohio, 1898.

To best understand Belli's role in this era, considerable background about the times in which he lived is essential.

Belli's part in the events leading to General Anthony Wayne's decisive victory at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794 is well documented. His involvement in early Kentucky politics, although mysterious, is more easily found today than in Norwood's time. Belli was a central figure in the political calculations behind the expansion of Freemasonry into the West and the civic battle that took place that ensured Kentucky's allegiance remained with the new government of the United States, and not Spain.

After ten years in Kentucky, Belli left the state the same way he arrived and worked in the state: quietly. He settled and prospered in Scioto County, Ohio, where he lived until his death in 1809. In 1909 his remains were moved from an abandoned cemetery and reinterred at Greenlawn Cemetery in Portsmouth, Ohio. His community gave him what was called a "stately funeral" since he was recognized as the founder of Alexandria and Portsmouth, Ohio. Norwood, as a representative of Lexington Lodge No. 1, spoke at the reinterment ceremony.

There is no record of Belli remained involved with Freemasonry in Ohio or elsewhere after his departure from Lexington.

BELLI'S BACKGROUND

Belli was citizen of England by birth, Holland at the request of his parents, and the United States by his own choice. He spent 1781-1783 in France and arrived in Alexandria, Virginia in May 1783.³

At the time of his death in 1809, he had amassed a one-thousand-acre estate in Adams County, Ohio that he named Belvidere. He founded the towns of Alexandria and Portsmouth, Ohio, was appointed by the governor as a Major in the Ohio Militia, held the elected position of County Recorder, Justice of the Court of the county, married and had five children.⁴ He was described as a "gentleman from the old school," and "of broad intelligence and of great influence." Belli was a "man of much learning and very influential in Masonic circles." He never changed his dress from the style during the Revolution. While he lived among backwoodsmen, "he always wore a wig and queue, a cocked hat, a waistcoat with facings, knee breeches, stockings and shoe buckles."⁵

We know Belli arrived in America from France on a Dutch vessel with a letter of introduction which seemed to open doors.⁶ The letter was from Founding Father John Jay, a prominent attorney who presided over the Continental Congress, served as first ambassador to Spain, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and later governor of New York.⁷ Exactly how he became acquainted with Jay is unknown, but it is known that prior to Belli's departure to the United States, Jay was in Paris with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and President of the Continental Congress, Henry Laurens. The four

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Belli married Cynthia Harrison in 1800. The town of Cynthiana, Kentucky was named after Cynthia who was daughter of Robert Harrison, who had donated land for its establishment. Lewis Collins, *History of Kentucky*, Collins & Company, 1877, 321.

⁵ Nelson W. Evans, Emmons B. Stivers, *History of Adams County, Ohio from its Earliest Settlement to the Present Time*, publisher unknown, 1900. *History of Adams County*,

⁶ Norwood, *The Mystery of John Belli*. (In 1788, eight months before Lexington Lodge No. 25 (now No. 1) was chartered by the Grand Lodged of Virginia, Alexandria No. 29 was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Virginia as Alexandria No. 22. showing George Washington as Master. In 1805, the Lodge changed its name to honor Washington and now known as Alexander-Washington No. 22.

⁷ Evans, Stivers.

represented the United States in negotiations to end the Revolutionary War in what became known as the Treaty of Paris.⁸

We are told that before his arrival, Belli studied the United States and became filled with the “extreme Republican notions of that time. In theory of government, he was a “rabid republican; in his own personal relations, he was an aristocrat, though he was hardly conscious of the fact.”⁹

History does not tell us, however, precisely how Belli became acquainted with Washington, Henry Knox, and perhaps even Franklin, Adams, Laurens, and other prominent Americans, but today we can see how the door opened with John Jay’s letter addressed to the well-connected, Josiah Watson.

Josiah Watson, a native of Ireland, owned considerable land in Virginia. He was a well-known merchant, a director of the Bank of Alexandria, and later Postmaster of Alexandria. He was also a business acquaintance and friend of George Washington. While Watson and Washington were involved in several business dealings, a 1779 venture in which Washington was given shares by Watson, involved a ship. Built for merchant seafaring, a 200-ton sloop christened *General Washington* later carried a letter-of-marque — a license or commission granted by a state to a private citizen to capture and confiscate the merchant ships of another nation. Refitted for that purpose, the vessel was officially classified as a “sloop-of-war” with eighteen cannons and a reported crew of up to 151 men.¹⁰

It is not known for sure when or where Belli became a Freemason. It is, of course, possible that he was admitted into the fraternity before arriving in America. If so, his affiliation may also account for his apparent immediate reception by some who were already Freemasons.

A “Masonic Certificate,” or “Diploma,” as it was described, is reported by Norwood in the 1913 book: The inscription read:

Set Lux et Lux Fiut To all true enlightened men. We do hereby certify that John Belli was regularly and entered in the lodge of ancient Free Masons established under warrant from the Grand Lodge of Virginia by name and style of the Lexington Lodge, No. 25 and has the mean himself as a Worthy Brother. And testimony of which we have hereunto set our hands and caused the Secretary of said Lodge to a fix the seal stamp of the 26 day of March Anno domini 1796 and Annaquo Lucis 5796. Thomas Love, Master; McGregor, Senior Warden, H. M’ILvain, Junior Warden, Test: B. Thurston, Secretary. (Seal)¹¹

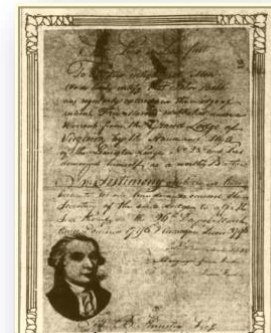


Image of John Belli certificate issued by Lexington Lodge No. 25 in 1796 as it appears in the Portsmouth Daily Times, October 23, 1909, page 9.

The certificate allowed Belli to introduce himself to other Freemasons when he left Kentucky in 1796. It is unclear whether this relic was the original certificate or photographic copy. No other certificate of this design from Lexington Lodge is known to exist. Belli’s certificate is the earliest official Masonic document in the possession of the lodge, at least in 1913. Regrettably, the

⁸ The Treaty of Paris, signed by Franklin, Adams, and Jay at the Hotel d’York in Paris, was finalized on September 3, 1783, and ratified by the Continental Congress in early 1784.

⁹ Evans, Stivers.

¹⁰ American War of Independence at Sea, *Virginia Privateer Ship General Washington*

<http://www.awiatsea.com/Privateers/G/General%20Washington%20Virginia%20Ship%20%5BSpeake%5D.html>, accessed June 2018,

<http://www.awiatsea.com/Privateers/G/General%20Washington%20Connecticut%20Brigantine%20%5BRogers%5D.html>, accessed June 2018.

¹¹ Portsmouth Daily Times, *Bones of Major John Belli Re-Interred in Greenlawn*, October 23, 1909, page 9, Newspapers.Com.

whereabouts of that certificate today, along with many other relics Norwood documented in his book, is unknown.¹²

We learn from Norwood that in September 1791, Washington assigned Belli to what was described as “public business” of a “confidential character,” yet in another section of the same document, the assignment is referred to as “confidential public business to Kentucky.”¹³ Then, in April 1792, Belli was appointed Deputy Quartermaster general of the United States with the rank of major by Washington and Secretary of War, Henry Knox.¹⁴ According to Norwood, prior to what he called Belli’s “mission in Kentucky,” Belli had a “conference with Washington in the autumn of 1791. Norwood does not cite the source of his information.

While it is apparent Belli was assigned to something considered *confidential*, the evidence points to what he did from 1786 to 1791 in Kentucky as his confidential assignment - not what he did with General Wayne and the Northwest campaign. In 1786 Belli was already involved in events that certainly carried the features of “public business” and better explains what was meant by “of a confidential character,” or “confidential public business to Kentucky.” The importance and extent of the role Belli played in Kentucky during the years preceding his service as United States Deputy Quartermaster, was a chapter of his life left unexamined by Norwood.

Understanding that importance and extent in context, coupled with Belli’s knack for organizing and coordinating, also explains reasons why he was suited for the Quartermaster assignment. Intriguingly, we find one man connected to both major events in Belli’s time in Kentucky, and as Quartermaster. That man was Revolutionary War General James Wilkinson, who was associated with several scandals and controversies through his military and civilian life.

Belli with General “Mad” Anthony Wayne

In the mid-1780s, the Western Indian Confederacy began a series of raids south of the Ohio River into Kentucky, to discourage settlement. Leaders in Kentucky, still a county of Virginia, were not permitted (since they were, at the time only a territory of Virginia) to call out the militia to engage the Indian tribes.

Many American Indians in the Northwest Territory had sided with the British in the Revolutionary War, but in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the British ceded western lands to the United States. The Indians, however, had not been consulted and resisted annexation of the area by the United States. The Western Indian Confederacy achieved major victories in 1790 and 1791



General Anthony Wayne

¹² Lexington Lodge No. 1 Complete Inventory compiled by the Preservation Committee, Donald Combs, III., Senior Deacon and Chair, 2018.

¹³ The Old Northwest Genealogical Society, Cincinnati History Library and Archives Cincinnati Museum, Center, Columbus, Ohio, 1898.

¹⁴ Norwood. *The Mystery of John Belli*.



under the leadership of Shawnee chief, Blue Jacket and Little Turtle of the Miami tribes. They were encouraged and supplied by the British, who also refused to evacuate British fortifications in the region as called for in the Treaty of Paris.

Kentucky was already considering an alliance with Spain, who, at the time, controlled land on both sides of the Ohio and Mississippi River, thus partially separating it from the United States. The importance of Kentucky land and the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to

the United States was clear. Steadfastly opposed to Spain gaining a further foothold in the territory, much less influencing the future of Kentucky, and controlling parts of the Ohio River, Washington, however, was unable to address the problem immediately without proper forces and supplies in that area. The fear that Spain might form an alliance with the Indian tribes in the Ohio Valley was another pressing concern.

Military attention during the Revolution largely overlooked the West, potentially spelling disaster for the United States, despite the bold efforts of General George Rogers Clark to defend the frontier while the Revolutionary War was ongoing. Two prior campaigns in the Northwest were ineffective. President Washington warned that a third straight defeat “would be inexpressively ruinous to the reputation of the government.”¹⁵

As a result, in early 1792 Washington recalled Revolutionary War General “Mad” Anthony Wayne to service and directed him to plan and lead a military expedition in the Northwest Indian War.¹⁶ Wayne commanded the newly formed military force called the “Legion of the United States,” To prepare his

¹⁵ Richard C. Knopf, Anthony Wayne and the Founding of the US Army

¹⁶ Wayne's Nickname: The nickname, “Mad Anthony” didn't originate from any battlefield exploits. According to the definitive biography on Wayne by Paul D. Nelson, the name became popular in the early winter of 1781, when Wayne's Pennsylvania division was in winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey. He writes, “The story goes that New Jersey law officers arrested an eccentric soldier known as “the Commodore” or “Jimmy the Drover,” for a local civil infraction. The soldier demanded Wayne's intervention. But Wayne threatened to have the miscreant flogged instead. “Jimmy the Drover” reportedly responded “Anthony is mad! Farewell to you; clear the coast for the Commodore, ‘Mad Anthony's’ friend.” Wayne's Pennsylvanians really got a kick out of the story and decided that “Mad Anthony” described their commander pretty well. You have to admit that it's not bad, as nicknames go. Though it didn't stem from combat, Wayne's exploits on and off the battlefield definitely made the name a good fit.” (from: *Anthony Wayne: Soldier of the Early Republic*, University of Indiana Press, 1985. Valley Forge and Freemasonry).

Was Wayne a Freemason? Ronald E. Heaton, *Valley Forge and Freemasonry*, The Freemason, Vol. VII, No.1, November 1961, The Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, reports, “Readers of this short article will recall seeing related the story that Pennsylvania's outstanding General of the Revolutionary War, “Mad” Anthony Wayne (himself not a Mason), entertained the Army Officers who were Masons at a banquet during the Spring of '78, amid the apple blossoms. Or, again, the story that Baron Von Steuben, a Mason in Germany, later a member of Trinity Lodge, No. 10 in New York, and still later on affiliating with Holland Lodge, No. 8 of New York, conferring the 32°, Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret, on Dr. Matthew Thornton of New Hampshire, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. General Lafayette, too, according to these unverified traditions, was made a Mason at Valley Forge, Washington himself acting as Master of the Lodge on that occasion. No basis in fact has been found to verify the Wayne story. The other two fall by the wayside when each claim is considered by the careful student of Masonic history. Ray Denslow's *10,000 Freemasons* notes, “there is no evidence to support the claim Wayne was a Freemason.”

forces, he established a basic training facility at Legionville (near Pittsburgh). This was the first attempt to provide basic training for regular Army recruits.¹⁷

In late June 1794, Wayne, with 3,600 soldiers (1,600 of them Kentucky militia) engaged in the Battle of Fallen Timbers breaking forever the power of Native Americans in the eastern region of the Northwest and leading the British to evacuate their garrison south of the Great Lakes. The results did much to restore the United States military prestige.

Wayne's original timetable, however, had been seriously disrupted because of unreliable civilian contractors who were engaged to provide supplies and build fortifications along the route Wayne was taking to the area south of present-day Toledo, Ohio. This explains why in April 1792, two years before the Battle of Fallen Timbers, President Washington sent Belli a commission as Deputy Quartermaster on the General Staff of "Mad" Anthony Wayne's Legion and ended reliance on civilian contractors. Considered a shrewd organizer with an ability to amass an inventory of goods in demand, Belli wasted no time in his new assignment.¹⁸ With a cash advance of ten-thousand dollars from General Wayne, he began the process of locating and acquiring large herds of cattle and other stock, tents, entrenching tools, hospital ordinance, clothing, and other supplies essential to support an army. In mid-1794, supported by Belli's efforts to also assure there were a series of forts built to protect the supply line, General Wayne, fought the final battle of the campaign against the Indian confederacy at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, in modern Maumee, Ohio (just south of present-day Toledo). The battle, a decisive victory for the United States, ended the hostilities in the Ohio Valley.

In the end, his widely amassed inventory served as the primary provisions of Wayne's army in what is now known to have been a secret plan to train forces for a ten-week campaign against the Indians in the Ohio Valley. In essence, Belli served as the behind-the-scenes government contractor engaged to locate, organize, acquire, and store provisions, build roads, and arrange transportation for the upcoming campaign that was anticipated to end the hostilities and lead to a permanent treaty.

This interim period of sufficiently provisioning the Legion may have further influenced the decision by Spain to not encroach any further than their current positions along the Mississippi, making it possible for Washington to avoid a larger war in which the United States could not afford to engage at the time.



Battle Of Fallen Timbers. General Wayne at the Battle of Fallen Timbers, 20 August 1794: wood engraving, American, 1848, artist known as Granger.

¹⁷ Richard C. Knopf, *Anthony Wayne and the Founding of the US Army*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1960.

¹⁸ Norwood. *The Mystery of John Belli*.

UNRAVELING THE MYSTERY OF A “PUBLIC MISSION OF A CONFIDENTIAL CHARACTER”

Was Belli’s assignment in support of General Wayne the so-called “public mission” of a “confidential character” and “confidential public business to Kentucky” that led Norwood to refer to Belli as a “secret agent?”

Believing a Quartermaster’s duties rise to the level of description of *confidential character*, must less “secret agent” status, is far-fetched. Furthermore, “confidential public business to Kentucky” is not relative to what Belli did in Ohio and Indiana because by this time Kentucky was already admitted into the Union and the Spanish threat resolved.

It appears more likely that Norwood’s interpretation or translation of this information in 1913 that led him to believe that Belli was a “secret agent for Washington in the Indian campaigns of Bro. Anthony Wayne” is out of sequence with the work Belli was in Kentucky to perform years before his assignment to General Wayne.

Belli reportedly lived in Alexandria, Virginia from the time of his arrival in America in May 1783 until 1791, at which time he was called into service to assist General Wayne.¹⁹ However, further research shows this to be impossible because we know Belli, some three years after his arrival in America, was living and owning property in Danville, Kentucky where he was well-known to many influential men of the times and involved at the root of much political intrigue.

In the years preceding Wayne’s military campaign, Kentucky politics and the careers of many influential men who would later become prominent elected officials in Kentucky, began to take form. Ten conventions were held in the quest for statehood. The first Masonic lodge was established in 1788 and Kentucky, in 1792 became the 15th state admitted to the Union. Belli was directly involved and participated in those events, and more.

So, what brought Belli over 500 miles westward to the territory of Kentucky from Alexandria, Virginia five years before he was assigned to General Wayne?

Conceivably, Belli was already involved in a “public mission” and work of a “confidential character” and “confidential public business to Kentucky” *for* Washington.

What made a young foreigner trusted enough to perform such a task?

Perhaps that trust can be traced back to not only John Jay, who vouched for him in a letter of introduction, but Josiah Watson, and the Parker family. Thomas Porter, who, like Jay, Watson, and the Parkers, were neighbors and friends of Washington. Parkers was a prominent merchant and participant in the Boston Tea Party.²⁰ Each, in addition to Secretary of War Henry Knox, would have been excellent character references.

What was Belli’s assignment in 1786?

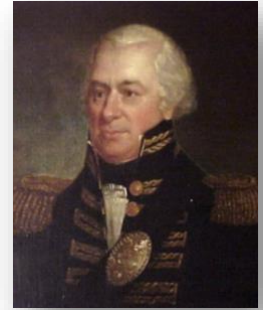
¹⁹ The Old Northwest Genealogical Society, Cincinnati History Library and Archives Cincinnati Museum, Center, Columbus, Ohio, 1898.

²⁰ Boston Tea Party, Ships and Museum, *Participants in the Boston Tea Party*, <https://www.bostonteatpartyship.com/participants-in-the-boston-tea-party>, accessed July 2018.

THE WILKINSON-BELLI CONNECTION

The "Spanish Conspiracy" is one of the most forgotten episodes in American history. Yet former Revolutionary War General James Wilkinson, his dealings with the Spanish, and his participation in the conventions that sought independent statehood for Kentucky all played an important part in the political development of the state and certainly contributed to the atmosphere of discontent in the territory.

As early as 1786, future U.S. Senator Humphrey Marshall, who was a delegate at the conventions to establish Kentucky statehood was implicating several prominent Kentucky politicians in a scheme to take Kentucky out of the Union and into an alliance with Spain. Wilkinson's activities, in Marshall's view, justified the direct accusation that the General and his political allies were behind what came to be called "the Spanish Conspiracy."²¹



General James Wilkinson

Wilkinson's disloyalties and treachery with Spain began after his service in the Continental Army ended. He crossed the Appalachian Mountains and joined the masses of pioneers eager to profit in the fertile Kentucky fields. He became a land speculator — and then, like many of his fellow homesteaders, fell promptly into debt.²² This is believed to be only one of the reasons underscoring his pervasive plotting to undermine the westward expansion of the country.²³

Wilkinson knew every one of consequence in the early nation, from Washington on down. But his career in the military and civilian life is peppered with double-dealing, betrayals, conspiracies, and dishonesty.²⁴ Clearly distrusted, he earned the title given to him by biographers as a "sociopathic rogue who, for all his defects, had the charismatic ability to live a double life in public view."²⁵ American historian William McLaughlin seems to have captured a snapshot of Wilkinson's career in the title of one of his essays. He characterized Wilkinson as "a general who never won a battle or lost a court-martial."²⁶

By the summer of 1785, Wilkinson was deeply involved in the politics of Kentucky. His reputation with Washington and others already tenuous from his war years — and for good reason - there is little doubt Secretary of War Knox, others, and later Washington as President, saw a genuine need to keep an eye on Wilkinson and his politics, plans, and schemes with the Spanish.

Commissioned a captain in the early days of the Continental Army, James Wilkinson served in the siege of Boston and then as an aide to General Benedict Arnold. He later was assigned as an aide to General Horatio Gates where he became embroiled in the failed Conway Cabal, an attempt to have Congress replace Washington during the Revolutionary War with General Gates. Wilkinson's involvement in the Conway Cabal may have been what gave birth to the justifiable fact that Washington and others never again trusted Wilkinson. Wilkinson was a brevetted brigadier general in November 1777 and served as

²¹ Anderson Chenault Quisenberry, *The Life And Times Of Hon. Humphrey Marshall*. Winchester, Kentucky, Sun Publishing Company, 1892.

²² Andro Linklater, *An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson*, Walker & Company, 2010.

²³ James E. Savage, *Spaniards, Scoundrels, and Statesmen: General James Wilkinson and the Spanish Conspiracy, 1787-1790*, https://history.hanover.edu/hhr/98/hhr98_1.html, accessed June 2018.

²⁴ Publishers Weekly Review of *An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson*, October 2010. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-8027-1720-7>, accessed June 2018.

²⁵ Linklater.

²⁶ William McLaughlin, *The Worst American General Ever: A General Who Never Won a Battle or Lost a Court-Martial*, n.d., <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/american-civil-war/worst-american-general-ever-general-never-won-battle-lost-court-martial.html>, accessed October 2018.

the secretary to the Board of War. General Washington forced Wilkinson to resign both positions for his role in the Conway Cabal.²⁷

Wilkinson later served as Clothier General of the Army until minor scandals forced his resignation in 1781 from the Continental Army. In 1782 he reluctantly joined and became a brigadier general in the Pennsylvania militia. By 1785, he then moved to Kentucky, but was recalled to active duty in 1792 when Washington created the Legion of the United States with General Wayne as its head. Wilkinson's recall to service in the newly formed federal command was at the rank of lieutenant colonel.

Wilkinson's recall took him out of Kentucky the same year the territory finally achieved statehood. Conceivable his recall to active duty may have served an opportunity of purpose for Washington and Knox to continue to keep an eye on Wilkinson until Kentucky could establish its new government and hold elections.²⁸

BELLI'S EARLY YEARS IN KENTUCKY

Belli apparently wasted no time when he arrived in Kentucky making acquaintances and friends in high places. His involvement with groups over his six-year residency in Danville connected him with historic events and men, who at the time or were, or were later to become not only Freemasons, but leaders in communities and at the state and federal levels.

By December 1786 Belli organized The Political Club in Danville, Kentucky.²⁹ The Club is credited for ultimately leading the effort toward statehood.



The topic of debate for each meeting was selected a month in advance. Some meeting nights, the topic was related to the district of Kentucky's relationship to Virginia; other nights it was national in scope. For several consecutive meetings, the members debated the federal constitution, clause by clause, and suggested amendments.³⁰

Along with two prominent Kentuckians, Judge Harry Innes and John Brown, Belli wrote the constitution and by-laws for the Political Club. The Club meetings eventually were held on Saturday nights at Grayson's Tavern in Danville, although fewer than half of the Club's members were residents of that city.³¹

²⁷ Conway Cabal: The name applied to the New England coterie in the Continental Congress and its efforts (1777–1778) to regain control of the army and the Revolution. The name comes from Major General Thomas Conway's letter to Horatio Gates, proposing to replace Washington with Gates as leader of the military campaigns. More generally, members opposed the alliance with France and resented Congress and Washington's authority. The plan backfired, however. When the plots were exposed, Washington received renewed public support that overwhelmed the conspirators both in Congress and in the army. Conway resigned from the army and was replaced by General Friedrich von Steuben. Richard Brookhiser, *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*. New York: Free Press, 1996.

²⁸ Andro Linklater, *An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson*, Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc., 2010.

²⁹ Thomas Speed, *The Political Club, Danville, Kentucky 1786-1790, Bring an Account of an Early Kentucky Society From the Original Papers Recently Found*, J.P. Morton and Company, printers to the Filson Society, 1894

³⁰ Paul Bingham Willinger, *A History of the Danville Conventions 1784-1792*, University of Louisville, Thesis and Dissertation Library, Master's Thesis, 1941.

³¹ Richard C. Brown, John E Kleber, ed. *The Kentucky Encyclopedia*. Associate editors: Thomas D. Clark, Lowell H. Harrison, and James C. Klotter. Lexington, Kentucky, The University Press of Kentucky, 1992

According to the Club's first constitution, new members of the Club had to be elected unanimously. Fines were levied against members for being late to meetings, leaving a meeting early, or missing a meeting without an acceptable excuse. Six members were considered a quorum, and at each meeting, a president was elected for the duration of that meeting. The Club constitution also called for the election of a secretary and treasurer.³²

Unsurprisingly, a number of those members are now known to have been Freemasons — many of whom later affiliated with Lexington Lodge No. 25, which was not chartered until the Political Club had been in existence for almost two years.

Samuel McDowell owned the house in which the Political Club met for the first time. Belli had become a friend of McDowell, who had participated in three major wars, served under Washington in the French and Indian War, was an aide-de-camp to Isaac Shelby in Lord Dunmore's War, and was part of Nathanael Greene's campaign in the Revolutionary War. Following the Revolutionary War, McDowell relocated to Kentucky and became a surveyor. Later, he was appointed one of the first district court judges in what would become the state of Kentucky. He became a leader of the movement to separate Kentucky from Virginia, presiding over nine of the state's ten constitutional conventions.³³



Grayson's Tavern, the meeting place of the Danville Political Club. A plaque commemorating the meetings of the Political Club is fixed near Grayson's Tavern.

Another twenty-nine members of the Club are found in every branch of the government after Kentucky's statehood was achieved in 1792 — from the office of the governor, judges, Minister to France, high state offices, trustees of Lexington, and in appellate and federal court positions. In February 1787, The Political Club appointed a committee to draft a form of government adapted to the needs of Kentucky.³⁴ Eleven members of the Club actively participated in ten constitutional conventions that led to separation from Virginia.³⁵ Belli was one of those members. He seemed to prefer staying in the background while the well-known men in the Club spoke and eloquently debated the matters at hand.³⁶

In January 1787, the first petition to Congress to separate Kentucky from Virginia and become a state came from the first Danville Convention of delegates formed for that purpose. Many of those delegates were members of the Political Club, as they would be for the next several conventions. The petition was rejected by Congress. The Convention members “not knowing where to lay the blame and fearing their proceedings might be thought illegal or unjustifiable broke up and proceeded no further.”³⁷

In a June 15, 1913, article in the *Courier-Journal*, a Louisville newspaper, we learn that John Belli was recognized as not only an organizer of the Political Club but was credited for saving the Danville

³² Thomas Speed, *The Political Club*.

³³ E. Polk Johnson, *A History of Kentucky and Kentuckians: The Leaders and Representative Men in Commerce, Industry and Modern Activities*. Lewis Publishing Company, 1912.

³⁴ Thomas Speed, *The Political Club*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

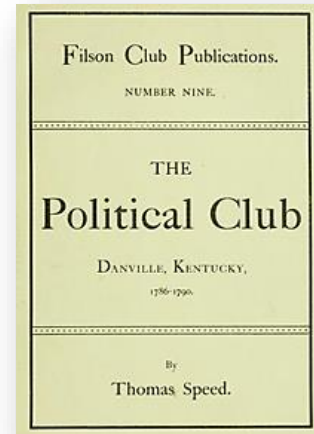
³⁶ Johnson, *A History of Kentucky and Kentuckians*.

³⁷ National Archives, Bill Providing for Kentucky Statehood, [15 December] 1786 <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-09-02-0107>, accessed October 2018.

Convention from “going to pieces after the Federal government had refused Kentucky statehood.”³⁸ How Belli saved the Convention was not included in the article.

The mystery surrounding the Political Club is that it was not mentioned or even hinted at in or out of print from 1786 until 1878. The existence of the Club may never have been known if not for the discovery made by Thomas Speed II in 1878.

Speed, the grandson of the Club secretary Thomas Speed, discovered a bundle of documents labeled “Political Club papers” while cleaning out his grandfather’s desk. The elder Thomas Speed had kept meticulous notes of the Club’s activities throughout its existence, though some were scribbled on bits of newspapers and old letters. Speed’s grandson published the documents through The Filson Historical Society in 1894.³⁹



Whether the silence surrounding the club was intentional or accidental remains one of those tantalizing historical questions. Most historians agree, the former does seem more logical. The very nature of political debates at the time centered around the need to secede from the state of Virginia. Leading and seasoning that talk was Wilkinson, who aggressively posed the idea of Spain becoming a potential ally and supporter of such secession, which could be construed or interpreted as a treasonous act by Virginia and certainly by the United States.⁴⁰

Interestingly, Thomas Speed notes in his 1894 book about the Political Club that Belli was thought by others to have been a lieutenant in the American Revolution. Belli arrived in America four months before the end of the Revolution making it doubtful that he served at all. Norwood’s book in 1913 (without citation) reports Belli was an officer in the French army prior to his arrival in America. While the two beliefs could certainly be confused, there is no evidence that he was either. Combined with his mysterious appearance in America in 1783, carrying impressive letters of introduction, and his swift rise as not only a merchant in Alexandria but as an associate of prominent men, the twenty-three-year-old Belli seems to have managed to create a mysterious aura about himself, with or without intention.

Belli again appears in the records of the Kentucky Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge, a group that adopted by-laws, philosophies, and standards similar to Freemasonry.⁴¹ Isaac Shelby, later Kentucky’s first governor, is often credited with founding the group. Shelby was closely associated with Belli.

The Kentucky Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge was one of many groups of the same title around the country at the time. Fifteen men in the Kentucky group were also members of the Political Club. Both groups were active at about the same time and frequently debated the same or similar subjects.⁴² The aim of the Society was to study nature using empirical methods, and thus to promote science “by collecting, preserving, and reasoning from discoveries and experiments.” The

³⁸ *One-Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of Lexington Lodge No. 1, F & A.M.*, Courier Journal, June 15, 1913. NOTE: Adding to the confusion of Belli’s origins, this article refers to him as a “young Belgian.”

³⁹ Ann Price Combs, *Notes on the Political Club of Danville and Its Members*, Filson Club History Quarterly, October 1961.

⁴⁰ Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky*, University of Kentucky Press, 1997.

⁴¹ James McClellan, *Science Reorganized*, Columbia University Press, First Edition, 1985.

⁴² H.E. Everman, *Governor James Garrard*. Cooper’s Run Press, 1981.

ultimate goal was completely practical: “to gather scientific knowledge in order to discover what we may further need and the proper means of supplying our wants.”⁴³

Sharing the knowledge of the time was a key objective for men living during the period of the great advances in science, nature and human knowledge that sprang from the Enlightenment. The Kentucky Society for the Promotion of Useful Knowledge shared the philosophies and principles of Freemasonry, but there is no indication from records that they practiced any rituals similar to the ones practiced in the fraternity. Records do make references to the seven liberal arts and sciences (grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, astronomy, music, logic, and geometry), an integral part of Freemasonry. The society in Kentucky also spoke frequently of civic involvement – another aspect of the fraternity. In Boston, the Society met for lectures at the Masonic Temple. The appreciation and study of art, literature and music and the cultural expansion of the same, became more focused. Many social clubs, societies, libraries, salons, and Masonic lodges of this stormy time became the compendium of shared knowledge, particularly in the lesser settled areas of what was to become part of the United States. Their objectives were similar, so it should be no surprise that the influence of one group may have easily fused with the purposes and goals of another.

THE LEXINGTON LODGE NO. 25 CHARTER

Norwood refers to Belli as a “charter member” of Lexington Lodge No. 25 and later credits Belli for initiating the idea of a petition to establish a regular lodge in Lexington and then coordinating the effort to obtain a charter from the Grand Lodge of Virginia.⁴⁴ That information is consistent, considering the other two organizations for which he was responsible for founding, co-founding, coordinating, and advancing.

Norwood offers no explanation of why Belli was the initiator, as opposed to one of the many notable men who were already Freemasons and lived in Kentucky much longer than he. Was the formation of a Masonic lodge in Kentucky part of a larger strategy at that particular time?

Because of the threat posed by Spain, it was politically advantageous to ensure that the growing population of Kentucky remained loyal to the newly created United States. The idea that a Masonic lodge in the territory would provide one more step toward advancing that assurance appears as a behind-the-scenes reason that Lexington Lodge 25 was granted a charter in 1788 and not later.

No explanation was given as to why Belli was the initiator as opposed to one of the many notable men who happened to already be Freemasons and lived in Kentucky much longer than he. Was the formation of a Masonic lodge in Kentucky part of a larger strategy at that particular time?

To ensure that a distant territory hundreds of miles from the Grand Lodge of Virginia, as well as the seat of federal government at the time, would be loyal, the most persuasive, well-known, and influential men in the Lexington area were selected to be the first three principal officers of that lodge: Richard Clough Anderson, Green Clay, and John Fowler. While no specific record proves Washington directly influenced the selection of these men, or the quick approval of the Lexington petition for charter from the Grand Lodge of Virginia, circumstances seem to suggest otherwise.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ J.W. Norwood, Master, Lexington Lodge 1, 1915, Personal Notes, Special Collections, Frankfort Historical Society, Frankfort, KY, examined in 2013, “Bones of Major John Belli Re-Interred in Greenlawn,” Portsmouth Daily Times, October 23, 1909, page 9, Newspapers.Com.

Washington was not sworn in as president until April 1789. Polling places opened on December 8, 1788, and closed on January 10, 1789. Few in the nation could doubt that Washington was going to be the nation's first president well in advance of the opening of those polls.

Henry Knox, one of Washington's favorite generals during the Revolution who was appointed the Secretary of War by Congress in 1775, became close friends with Washington; the two often socialized together with their families during the years between the war and Washington's election. It would be improbable, considering their close relationship, for Knox not to have briefed Washington on the impending issues he faced as Secretary of War. Such affairs would certainly include the Spanish question and the possible Indian war that was looming in Kentucky — issues in which Washington would become later entwined as president.

By the time Washington was sworn in as president, John Belli had plenty to report about events in Kentucky — supplying much intelligence for the new administration that provided an opportunity to plan well ahead for the issues facing the country in that territory.

Petitioning to establish a Masonic lodge in Lexington may seem an unlikely major initiative for Henry Knox or Washington, yet it was clearly imperative to assemble men loyal to the United States to help stabilize the area. The rush to get such a lodge chartered by November 1788 does underscore the suggestion it may indeed have been part of a broad political maneuver.

The Grand Lodge of Virginia, established in 1778, was on its third Grand Master by the time Washington became president. Examining the connections between the first three Virginia Grand Masters, and Washington, Knox, Belli, and even John Fowler, who became the first junior warden in Lexington's lodge, provides new insight into how the hurried petition may have been influenced.

John Blair, Jr., Virginia's first Grand Master, was a close associate of Washington and a friend of John Fowler as well a member of the same lodge in Williamsburg, Maryland, where Fowler was raised. Blair served with Washington in the Constitutional Convention and was later appointed by Washington to the Supreme Court. James Mercer, the second Grand Master, was Washington's lawyer. Edmund Randolph, the third Grand Master, who signed the Charter for Lexington Lodge 25 in November 1788, served as an aide-de-camp to General Washington in 1775 and was appointed the nation's first attorney general by Washington. He also succeeded Thomas Jefferson as secretary of state during Washington's second term.

Petitioning to establish a Masonic lodge in Lexington may seem an unlikely major initiative for Henry Knox or Washington, yet it was clearly imperative to assemble men loyal to the United States to help stabilize the area. The rush to get such a lodge chartered by November 1788 does underscore the suggestion it may indeed have been part of a broad political maneuver.

None of these convenient connections prove that Washington or Knox exerted any influence on the unexplained rush to charter Kentucky's first Masonic lodge. Today, however, viewed in the context of the issues in Kentucky at the time, and considering that the

Grand Lodge of Virginia would not meet again to entertain petitions for new lodges until the fall of 1779 (late in Washington's first year as president), it follows that forming a new lodge with inspiring leadership at its helm in place before the end of Washington's first year in office was a constructive and productive strategy. There was certainly good reasons for a political, behind-the-scenes rush to establish the most geographically distant Masonic lodge in the new nation in the territory of Kentucky.

Belli was involved in virtually every political and community event that ultimately led to the defeat of the movement to break away from Virginia and become a Spanish territory from 1786 until 1792 — the year he was commissioned Deputy Quartermaster. Belli was certainly on a “public mission” and work of a “confidential character,” and “confidential public business to Kentucky,” but that description has been confused with his work in Kentucky from 1786 until 1796.

The Grand Lodge of Kentucky was formed in Lexington in 1800 by the five central Kentucky lodges previously chartered by Virginia. In its final Return to the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1799, forty-six men were listed as Masons at Lexington Lodge No. 25. Based on a review of the names of members in that return and earlier newspaper accounts from 1789 through 1795 that noted or referenced men of the community who were Freemasons, all but eleven of the men at Lexington 25 were noted founders of the city or the new state; military leaders; well-known patriots of the Revolutionary War; or the most significant landowners, businessmen, and community leaders.

It is understandable that Masonry at the time attracted men with these backgrounds. It is unsurprising, given the political context of the times and Belli’s “mission,” that such loyalists and men of reputation could influence the population of roughly 12,000 people who, at the time, made up the inhabitants of the Kentucky territory.⁴⁵

Belli was not the only man in Kentucky who knew Washington, of course. The first two Masters of Lexington Lodge No. 25 knew Washington. Richard C. Anderson, the first Master, fought at Trenton and spent the winter with Washington at Valley Forge (and was a member of the Danville Conventions for statehood). Green Clay sat in the Virginia legislature representing the Kentucky territory — then but a county of Virginia. But as Norwood points out, neither of these men, or other Kentuckians, who knew Washington, Knox, or other men in the first federal government were chosen for any specific-mission in Kentucky as was Belli.

So, the plausible answer to the question of whether Belli was in service to Washington *before* his “public mission” and work of a “confidential character” attributed by Norwood to his Quartermaster work for General Wayne, is, *yes*. Was Belli responsible for Lexington becoming the home of the first regularly chartered Masonic lodge in Kentucky? Again, the plausible answer is, *yes*.

Why was such a young immigrant selected for such a long-term strategy? Was it even a devised strategy or was it something that slowly evolved as circumstances and events dictated? After all, Belli was known to be “filled with the extreme Republican notions of that time.” In theory of government, he was a “rabid republican.”⁴⁶ Why was he selected to assist Wayne? He clearly had considerable contacts in the mercantile business, and after several years of service prior to that, trust and competency seem the likely reason he was made Deputy Quartermaster — and to continue to keep an eye on Wilkinson.

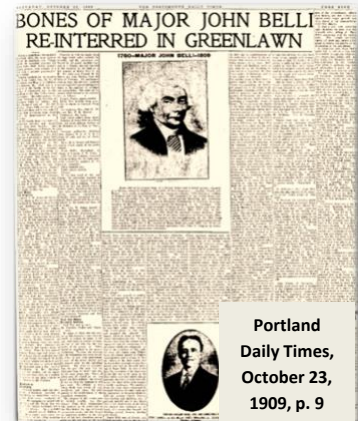
QUIET INVOLVEMENT

Belli arrived in Kentucky with no fanfare. A decade later, he left the same way. The availability of land in southeastern Ohio lured him from Lexington where he founded two towns in Scioto County. As might be

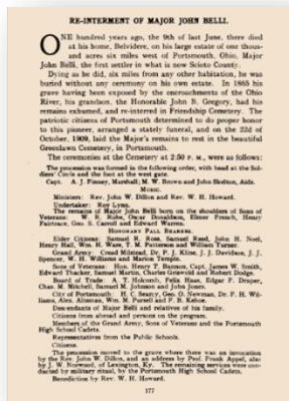
⁴⁵ Federal Depository Library. “Return Of The Whole Number Of Persons Within The Several Districts Of The United States For 1790.” <http://census.gov/library/publications.htm>, accessed March 2021.

⁴⁶ Combs.

Belli's deep involvement in The Political Club had been forgotten by history for over 100 years, until documents discovered in 1878 were finally published by The Filson Historical Society in Louisville, Kentucky in 1894.⁴⁷



The earliest surviving official records of Lexington Lodge No. 25 (Returns to the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1794 and 1799), do not list John Belli as a member, however, a Masonic document issued to Belli by the lodge in March 1796 (the year he demitted and left Kentucky for Ohio) proves that he was indeed a member. That document was not known to exist until 1909 — 113 years after it was issued. We find that the explanation for his name not being part of the 1794 Return is that under a Virginia rule, “only resident Masons” were listed in Returns.⁴⁸ Belli was not a resident of Lexington. His property and home were in Danville, Kentucky (roughly 40-45 miles from Lexington by way of the roads at that time). As Norwood reports, Belli’s family provided the information that their grandfather “organized” and “founded” Lexington Lodge.⁴⁹



Making it further challenging to piece together Belli's life prior to his move to Kentucky, and during his ten years in the state, was the discovery that several of the documents available about him turn out to simply be wrong.

Another example, he is reported in an early 1900 document as living in Alexandria, Virginia and operating a successful mercantile business, during the same years that he was, in fact, living in Danville, Kentucky and regularly involved in well-documented meetings of The Political Club, and later in attendance and actively participating in each of the ten Conventions (1784-1791) pursuing statehood.

Another example is found in nine pages of information about Belli titled, *Reinternment[sic] of Major John Belli*. Published in 1909 in Columbus, Ohio, the *Old Northwest, Genealogical Quarterly Volume XII*, praises his life and accomplishments. The story tells us that Belli left England at age 16, joined and served in the American Revolution as a Lieutenant, then four pages later claims that he immigrated from England to France in



⁴⁷ Combs.

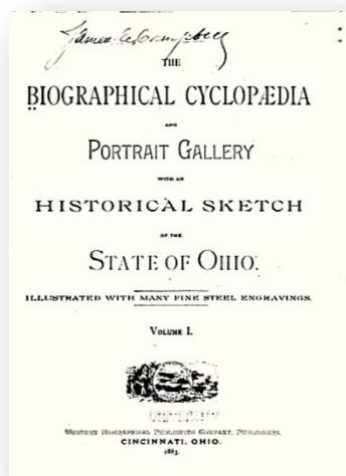
⁴⁸ Norwood, *Concise History Of Lexington Lodge No. 1, F. & A.M., November 17, 1788-1913: Showing, Without Rhetorical Fog, The Spirit Of The Work In Lexington For The Past Century And A Quarter / Published By Order And Authority Of The Lodge, Lexington Lodge No. 1, 1913*. 57.

⁴⁹ Norwood, *The Mystery of Major John Belli*.

1781 where he lived until he first arrived in the United States in 1783. Several other contradictory dates and events are found in those nine pages.

Thanks to Norwood, enough information was collected about Belli to spur further inquiry in 2013 about Belli's sudden appearance of in Kentucky. Norwood operated largely on information from the family of John Belli who had invited a representative from the Lexington Lodge to attend Belli's reinterment. Norwood accepted the invitation on behalf of the lodge and even spoke at the ceremony.

Unless Norwood had been aware of the Knox-Washington connection with Belli, and the distrust they both harbored for James Wilkinson from the Conway Cabal (1778) and current concern about Wilkinson's suspected espionage on behalf of Spain to encourage the territory of Kentucky to form an alliance with Spain, there is no reason to believe Norwood would had a reason to connect Belli to anything other than what the family provided — some of which proves today to be out of sequence.⁵⁰ In the absence of that context, and without awareness that once Kentucky was admitted into the Union in 1792 Wilkinson's platform was neutralized primarily because of early work of The Political Club that led to the ten conventions for statehood (occurrences stirred by Belli), Norwood simply wrote about that which he knew at the time.



Apparently, Norwood did not see the connection either that as soon as Wilkinson's activities were diffused, he was re-called to military duty by Washington in 1791, given the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, and assigned to General Anthony Wayne's Legion that was preparing to confront the Indian Tribes of the Northwest, Belli was assigned to Wayne's Legion as well. Wilkinson's assignment is believed to have been a political move that provided solutions to Knox and Washington. The recall to service removed Wilkinson from Kentucky and placed him in a position where his movements could be more easily monitored.

To ensure such "monitoring," as well to assign a competent organizer to coordinate the massive provision requirements to Wayne's Legion for the campaign, John Belli was promptly appointed by Knox as Quartermaster General for Wayne's Legion.

Wilkinson remained in the military once the Northwest campaign concluded and never returned to Kentucky. Although involved in, and on the peripheral of several military and political scandals for the next twenty years, he managed to serve in military positions until after the War of 1812.⁵¹ The Knox-Washington political concern about Wilkinson in Kentucky was validated in 1866, when Louisiana historian Charles Gayarré, following extensive archival research in the Spanish archives in Madrid, exposed Wilkinson as having been a highly paid spy in the service of the Spanish Empire.⁵²

Belli resigned his Quartermaster General position after the Northwest campaign and did return to Kentucky, but moved on to Ohio in 1796, his "confidential mission" presumably completed. Knox retired as Secretary of War in 1794. Washington left the presidency in 1797.

Perhaps if Norwood connected the context behind Belli's time in Kentucky, it would have also led him to

⁵⁰ McLaughlin, Linklater, Savage.

⁵¹ McLaughlin.

⁵² Charles Gayarré, *The History of Louisiana*, 4 vols., W. J. Widdleton, New York, 1866.

recognize that Belli was more than “one of the chief movers” in the formation and operation of The Political Club. Belli, a virtual stranger in the state to many at the time, seemed to quickly assemble the majority of well-known Kentuckians who became members of the Club, and who also staunchly opposed alliance with Spain. Those men pushed for public support of their opposition, relying a great deal on their celebrity, and standing in their communities. Finding many of these same men already veterans of the Revolution, as well as Freemasons, the idea that Belli pushed for the formation of a Masonic lodge in Central Kentucky that would bring additional voice and support against Wilkinson’s scheme for an alliance with Spain, is not a leap in logic.

The fact that two of the first principle officers of Lexington Lodge No. 25 were members of the Virginia Legislature and one was a member of the Grand Lodge of Virginia with authority to Charter a lodge in Lexington, made the successful, seemingly rushed petition for that Charter, more understandable. Of course, the fact that Knox was a Freemason and understood the value of a Masonic presence in Central Kentucky at that time, and three of Washington’s close associates (one his personal attorney) would have a voice in approving such a Charter in Kentucky, adds to the context that answers the question of not only why, but how Freemasonry came to Kentucky when it did.



Original November 17, 1788, Lexington Lodge No. 25 Charter from the Grand Lodge of Virginia

The long-standing story about why Freemasonry came to Kentucky when it did was sown by Norwood in 1913 by suggesting that men in Kentucky who were made Masons elsewhere, simply missed attending lodge. The closest lodge prior to 1788 was over 500 miles away, in Virginia.

J. Winston Coleman, the next Mason who wrote a history of Lexington Lodge and Kentucky Freemasonry in 1933, furthered that idea, which was largely unchallenged at least until Norwood’s 1913 book was discovered again in 2013 and Belli’s name was recognized. Coleman had also overlooked the significance of John Belli’s presence at the time the lodge was Chartered, as well as the context of the time of the appearance of the first regularly Chartered lodge in Kentucky. By the time Kentucky became a state, the Grand Lodge of Virginia had chartered five additional lodges located the more populated areas of the state. And yes, Belli was in Kentucky at that time, but his involvement in being part of establishing any of those additional lodges is unknown.

Many of the men who were already Freemasons and became the initial members of the Lexington Lodge had been in Kentucky for years without having a lodge within a reasonable distance to attend. There is no document known to exist that suggests the formation of a Masonic lodge was more than perhaps a thought, at least until John Belli appeared in Kentucky during a time when marshalling good men, loyal to the new nation became essential.

In this regard, establishing context is everything when it comes to the mysteries surrounding the enigma that cloaked Belli’s life in Kentucky — a life that was certainly immersed in mystery.



Since Belli seemed to prefer quiet involvement, such mystery shrouding his life would probably please him.

There is one clear and consistent uniqueness, however, about the character of John Belli that is not a mystery and threads together what is confirmed about his life: he acquired the confidence of all with whom he became acquainted and retained it.

History may have fallen short in documentation that affirms Belli was an agent or spy for Washington and appeared in Kentucky to organize resistance to Wilkinson's plans, but the circumstances surrounding all that occurred after Belli's sudden appearance in Central Kentucky, strongly puts forward the idea that that was the case.