

THE FIRST PRESIDENTIAL IMPEACHMENT TRIAL – MAY 1868

by
D.L. Aldridge

Brother Andrew Johnson was a tailor from Tennessee – virtually self-educated. He became President of the United States when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. The War Between the States was drawing to a close. His problem – his opportunity was to aid both the North and the South during the Era of Reconstruction.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had freed the slaves in the Southern States that had seceded from the Union. Now it was time to free the slaves in the North. The United State Congress passed a law whereby a Vice-President succeeding to the Presidency could not fire – terminate the employment of any member of the deceased President's cabinet. Johnson was hung with Lincoln's appointments. Andrew Johnson fired the Secretary of State, George M. Stanton. This would be the basic charge against the President

There was another issue – amnesty for the Confederate soldiers who signed “to never take up arms against the United States again.” Having signed the Amnesty Agreement, each soldier was set free on his own recognizance.

Certain Confederate leaders had left the United States for Mexico, Great Britain, Europe, and South America. Brigadier General Albert Pike left Arkansas; he successfully escaped to Canada. The Southern District of the Scottish Rite wanted him as their leader. He was still a 32° Scottish Rite Mason, and the ritual rite he had written while waiting for the war to end had impressed all who read his writings – 33 degrees, the ceremonies of Knight Commander of the Court of Honor, the Installation Ceremony, Four Separate Rubrics, Secret work for the lodge of Perfection, Chapter of Rose Croix, Council of Kadosh and Consistory, and his 1500 page volume on “Morals and Dogma.”

The Scottish Rite leaders went from Charleston to Washington D.C. to visit Andrew Johnson – yes, Johnson would personally pardon Albert Pike. Each man regretted the fact that Pike's two brigades of Cherokee Indian troops fighting on the side of the South had scalped the Federal troops they defeated – they took no prisoners. Johnson was wise enough to see that Pike might be useful in dealing with those same Cherokee Indians that were now back on the Oklahoma Indian reservation. The people didn't like Johnson sparing Pike imprisonment.

They felt he should join Robert E. Lee and Bro. Jefferson Davis. His citizenship should be denied him. President Johnson had his way. Albert Pike moved to Charleston, South Carolina.

The impeachment trial of Bro. Andrew Johnson was a nasty affair from beginning to end. Senator Jim Lane of Kansas could no longer stand the harassment at home and in Washington, D.C. On July 1, 1866 he committed suicide. The governor of Kansas was Samuel J. Crawford, a member of Topeka Lodge No. 12. In 1859 Edmund G. Ross had been made a master mason in Topeka Lodge No. 12. He was a man of integrity. He was Governor Crawford's choice to become the junior Senator from Kansas.

President John F. Kennedy praised Ross highly in his book "Profiles in Courage." The radicals in the senate knew the vote for the impeachment of the President would be close, so they went to work on Ross. The radicals did not overlook a single approach in their attempt to influence Ross. Many who favored Johnson's views wouldn't risk committing political suicide to support him. In reply to a telegram from Kansas, signed by 1,000 and others demanding he vote for conviction, Ross responded, "I do not recognize your right to demand I vote either for or against conviction. I have taken an oath to do impartial justice according to the constitution and laws, and trust that I shall have the courage to vote according to the dictates of my judgement and for the highest good of my government." It would take a two-thirds affirmative vote to convict Johnson. Fifty-four senators would vote in "The Trial that should have never been."

It was a dramatic moment in the Senate of the United States on May 16, 1886, when Bro. Salmon P. Chase, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, presiding at the trial called for the final vote. "How say you Senator Ross, is the respondent Andrew Johnson, President of the United States guilty or not guilty of a high dis-demeanor as charged in this article of impeachment?" There was no sound, hardly a movement throughout the Senate chamber, as Ross rose to cast the final vote. The count stood at thirty-five for convection, eighteen not guilty – Ross's vote would be decisive. Against the wall was a chart depicting how each of the Senators had voted. Saying "not guilty" Ross sat down. With these two words his political career ended. He returned to Kansas where he and his family were socially ostracized and ignored.

By practicing the cardinal virtues of Masonry – Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance, and justice, a great Mason chose to sacrifice a career in the Senate. His one vote was very important.

Andrew Johnson served out the term of Abraham Lincoln. He remained a loyal American. He had never approved of the hard-drinking of U.S. Grant, his successor in office. He absolutely refused to ride in the same carriage with him to the inauguration.

In March of 1875 Andrew Johnson returned to Washington as the jr. Senator from Tennessee. In July 1875 he suffered a fatal stroke during a congressional recess. Greenville Lodge No. 119 preformed Johnson's last rites at his grave.

Sources:

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- B. Leaders of Truth-Allen E. Roberts
- C. Short Talk Bulletins
- D. History of Albert Pike

Darrell L. Aldridge is:

Worshipful Master – Louisiana lodge of Research
Member of Graham Surghnor lodge No. 383
Robert W. Cretney Lodge no. 420
Delhi Lodge No. 120
Past Venerable Master of Monroe lodge of Perfectaion

Past Commander of Kadosh of Monroe Consistory
Member of Scottish Rite Research Society
Member of Quatar Coronati Correspondence Circle
Member of Missouri Lodge of Research
Charter Member of Barak Shrine Temple