

John Ross Robertson

Grand Master (1890 – 1892) of the Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons
of Canada in the Province of Ontario

Grand First Principal (1894 – 1896) of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of
Canada in the Province of Ontario

Grand Master (1882 – 1885) of the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Ontario
(Cryptic Rite)



Photo from the Grand Lodge

(1841 – 1918)

Prepared by V.W. Bro. Marshall Kern.

A man with the eminence and impact on society of John Ross Robertson is properly the subject for a thorough biography. Several such biographies have been written, and

you are encouraged to read these four biographies to more fully appreciate John Ross Robertson:

*Taylor, J.E. **John Ross Robertson – Freemason.** (1961) Papers of the Canadian Masonic Research Association Volume 2: pages 1065 – 1072.*

*Poulton, Ron, **The Paper Tyrant: John Ross Robertson of the Toronto Telegram** (1971) Clarke, Irwin. ISBN: 7720049217, 9787720049212*

*Ralph, E.V.. **M.W. Bro. John Ross Robertson, His Life and Contribution to Masonic Heritage.** (1989) Proceedings of The Heritage Lodge No. 730, No. 13: 6–63.*

*Minko Sotiron, “**ROBERTSON, JOHN ROSS,**” in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 14, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed December 13, 2024, https://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/robertson_john_ross_14E.html.*

What follows is a very brief summary of salient points extracted from these and other sources.

John Ross Robertson was born December 28th, 1841, son of John Robertson, a successful dry goods merchant in Toronto. He was educated at Upper Canada College, Toronto, where he gave evidence of his skill as a compositor and as a printer. When it came to the choice of a vocation he pursued journalism.

His early enterprises included publication of The Grumbler (a weekly satirical paper) and Sporting Life (the first sporting paper in Canada devoted to athletic sports). In 1863 he was city editor of the Toronto Globe and in 1866 he helped found the Daily Telegraph (which ceased publication 1872).

In December 1869 John Robertson of the Telegraph and Robert Cunningham of the Globe visited North West Canada where, at Fort Garry, they became prisoners of Louis Riel for a short time. This was followed by three years in England as the London correspondent and representative of the Toronto Globe. On his return in 1875 he undertook the management of The Nation edited by Prof. Goldwin Smith, an association that led to the establishment of the Evening Telegram in April 1876, said to have been the only daily paper in Canada which paid its way from the start.

It was his initiatives and strong support which contributed immeasurably to the improvement of medical services and facilities in Toronto including an improved ambulance service in Toronto in 1888 and support for the Children’s Hospital (now SickKids Hospital in Toronto).

He entered federal politics and represented East Toronto from 1896 to 1900 in the House of Commons, as an independent Conservative. In 1902, he and his wife attended the Coronation of King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. In the 1917 New Year’s

Honours List he was offered a Knighthood and a seat in the Senator, both of which he gratefully declined.

M.W. Bro. Robertson passed away on May 31, 1918, at his home, 291 Sherbourne St., Toronto, at the age of seventy-eight. He was interred in Toronto at the Necropolis and Crematorium after the simple rites of the Presbyterian Church. His grave marker is a large red granite column with several generations of names inscribed on the four-sided base, but it has no Masonic references.

The professional portrait of John Ross Robertson as Grand Master was displayed at John Ross Robertson Lodge No. 545 until an amalgamation to form Riverdale John Ross Robertson Lodge No. 494. This continued until the lodge went dark in 2022 and the portrait was transferred to the care of York Masonic Temple.

Masonic Career

Mr. John Ross Robertson was initiated in King Solomon's Lodge No. 22, Toronto, on March 14, 1867, and is shown as a Life Member on the 1896 membership list. He joined Mimico Lodge No. 369, Lambton Mills, and in 1879 was Worshipful Master for the first time in a Masonic lodge. In 1883 he was elected to the Board of General Purposes of the Grand Lodge of Canada. He was named the Grand Representative of the Grand Lodge of Virginia near our Grand Lodge. And in 1886, he was elected District Deputy Grand Master of Toronto District No. 11. He visited each of the 35 lodges in his care twice. Each visit is carefully reported, including the distance he traveled – a total of 2,160 miles during the year. DDGM Robertson was busy and hosted seven District Lodges of Instruction to reinforce uniformity and competence in the ritual.

Past DDGM Robertson was elected Deputy Grand Master in 1888. M.W. Bro. John Ross Robertson was elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of A.F. and A. M. of Canada for the 1890 - 1892 term.

In 1891, the year that Sir John A. MacDonald died, M.W. Bro. Robertson was appointed to succeed him as Representative of the United Grand Lodge of England near the Grand Lodge of Canada. Upon the occasion of the coronation of King Edward VII, he was given the rank of Past Junior Grand Warden of the United Grand Lodge of England. Outside of Canada, besides his Grand Lodge appointment in England, he was elected an honorary member of Mary's Chapel Lodge No. 1, Edinburgh, and became a member of Fortrose Lodge No. 108, Stornoway, Scotland. In 1888 he became a Correspondence Circle Member of the Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, London, England.

In Capitular Masonry, he joined King Solomon's Royal Arch Chapter No. 8 in 1867. He became its First Principal in 1880. He continued in this office in 1881 and was elected Grand Scribe 'Z' in the same year. He was elected Grand First Principal in 1894 and was re-elected in 1895. During his terms he visited all the Chapters under his jurisdiction.

In Knights Templary, he joined Odo de St. Amand Preceptory No. 17, in 1876, and was Marshal in 1879 and Constable in 1880. The following year when Odo de St. Amand and Geoffrey St. Aldemar Preceptories were amalgamated he was elected the first Presiding Preceptor of the joint body. He was elected Provincial Grand Prior of the Toronto District in 1882 and in the following year was Grand Pursuivant of the Sovereign Grand Priory of Canada.

John R. Robertson joined the Cryptic Rite in 1875 when he was admitted into Adoniram Council No. 2, Toronto, becoming TIM in 1876 and appointed a Grand Steward of Grand Council in 1876. At Grand Council he served as Grand Captain of the Guard (1877-78), Inspector-General, Toronto Division (1878-79), Grand Treasurer (1879-80), Grand Lecturer (1880-81) and Grand Lecturer (1881-82). He was elected and installed as Grand Master at the Twelfth Annual Assembly (July 14, 1882) for the 1882-83 term. He was subsequently re-elected as Grand Master for the 1883-84 and 1884-85 terms. He was elected as Grand Recorder for the 1885-86 and 1886-87 terms.

The Scottish Rite obituary notice for M.W. Bro. Robertson reads: "He joined the Scottish Rite in the City of Toronto in 1876, and at the time of his death was the oldest member in the Valley of Toronto. He did not at any time take any prominent part in the Scottish Rite work, and it was only because of his love for the Craft and his great work in that branch of the Order that he was made an Honorary Inspector-General 33° at a special meeting of the Supreme Council for Canada in the year 1903."

As Grand Master

As the 14th Grand Master, M.W. Bro. John Ross Robertson visited each of the 348 Masonic lodges in the jurisdiction during his term. This feat has not been replicated due to the growth of the number of lodges, and the distances required. When he visited a lodge he provided "an hour's talk upon the trials and triumphs of those who founded the Craft in Canada, an epitome of our pioneer history". We have a sense of the content of this presentation by reading the 'Historical Address' M.W. Bro. Robertson delivered to the 1905 Grand Lodge Communication in his role as the Grand Historian.

Ever aware of the significance of respecting history, M.W. Bro. Robertson commented on the centennial year of the establishment of Freemasonry in Ontario. "One hundred years ago the first Craft Provincial Grand Lodge met at Niagara. It was known as the Provincial Grand Lodge of Upper Canada, and was warranted by the Ancient or Athol Grand Lodge of England, on the 7th March, 1792, with R. W. Bro. Wm. Jarvis as Provincial Grand Master. Acting on the recommendation of Grand Lodge at its last annual communication, I have appointed a committee to arrange the details of the celebration, so that the occasion may be appropriately observed."

From his own experience as a DDGM he encouraged DDGMs to accurately report the condition of Freemasonry in their District.

Of the several Rulings he made, one that has withstood the test of time is his ruling that a Craft funeral or Masonic Memorial Service must be requested by the brother Mason before his death or requested after his passing by the family. A lodge is not to impose any Masonic ceremony on the family.

As Past Grand Master

The John Ross Robertson Lodge No. 545, Toronto, was named in his honour when it formed in 1919. John Ross Robertson Lodge No. 545 amalgamated in 2001 with Riverdale Lodge No. 494 to form Riverdale John Ross Robertson Lodge No. 494. The lodge went dark in 2022.

There is an Ontario Historical Plaque on the grounds of his former home, 291 Sherbourne Street, Toronto. It reads: "John Ross Robertson 1841-1918. Founder and publisher of the Evening Telegram, Robertson was a principal benefactor of the Hospital for Sick Children and served on its board of trustees for over 30 years. His vast collection of documents, maps and paintings, dealing primarily with the history of Toronto, is now owned by the Toronto Public Library."

M.W. Bro. Robertson made a unique gift to Toronto Masonry in the form of a Master's Chair. This chair is historic because it is made from two oaken beams taken from the floor of the "Goose and Gridiron Inn" in St. Paul's Church Yard, the Inn where the first Grand Lodge met in 1717. These beams were given to Bro. Robertson by the builder who demolished the building. It has the following inscription under the seat: "This chair is made from the rafters which supported the first floor room of 'The Goose and Gridiron' Tavern, London Yard, St. Paul's Church Yard, London, England, built in 1670, in which the election of Anthony Sayer, first Grand Master Grand Lodge of England took place June 24, 1717, secured by J. Ross Robertson of Toronto on its demolition in 1897." The chair is used by the Grand Lodge for the installation of the Grand Master.

His Masonic endeavours touched on another and unexpected aspect of the Craft. Indigent Masons were dying in Toronto and had no burial place or no means to be interred. To remedy this, in 1883 he purchased a plot in Mount Pleasant Cemetery facing Yonge Street with 243 individual resting places, and it is deeded as follows: "That he was desirous of providing a burial ground for the interment of such poor and indigent Masons, legally and lawfully admitted members of the Order known as A.F. & A.M.'s as may die without having provided for their interment, or whose interment it may be desired by the proper representatives of the Masonic Order". The Chairman and Secretary-Treasurer of the Masonic Board of Relief of Toronto, who are elected by the representatives of the Toronto Lodges, were appointed custodians with the authority to permit burial in this Masonic plot "free from all fees and charges" to any member of a lodge of A.F. & A.M. under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Canada, or in a jurisdiction recognised by that Grand Lodge, a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, a Royal

and Select Master, a Preceptory of Knights Templar, or the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite.

Perhaps the greatest contribution John Ross Robertson made to Freemasonry was his literary activity. He was the author of a two-volume History of Freemasonry in Canada, published in 1899, and wherever a reference to early Canadian Masonry is quoted, that reference nearly always comes from these two volumes.

He authored two other Masonic histories. One is a History of the Knights Templars of Canada, published in 1890. The other, Robertson and Drummond's History of the Cryptic Rite, appeared in print in 1888. In 1904, when his name was proposed as an active member of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076, ER, his literary works were put forward in support of his candidature. His Talks with Craftsmen seems to be very little known. He also wrote a history of King Solomon's Lodge, Toronto, from 1864 to 1885. Not the least of his writings is the six-volume set of Robertson's Landmarks of Toronto, now a valuable source of anything that belongs to Toronto's past, and a publication that must have taken a vast amount of time to compile.

During his lifetime he built up a Masonic library of three thousand volumes, originally given to the Toronto Public Library, but in 1935 it became the start of the magnificent Grand Lodge Library of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario.

Sources: *In addition to the four biographies listed at the beginning of this article, these additional sources were consulted:*

- (1) Jenkyns, Michael *Biography of PGM John Ross Robertson* Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario
- (2) *Annual Proceedings* of the Grand Lodge A.F.& A.M. of Canada in the Province of Ontario: 1891, 1892, 1897, 1905.
- (3) *Commemoration of the Graves of the Grand Masters*, December 2018. A project of the Museum and Archives Team.
- (4) Herrington, W. S., and Foley, R.S., editor Dunlop, Wm. J. 'A History of the Grand Lodge A.F.&A.M. of Canada in the Province of Ontario' (1955) McCallum Press Ltd., Toronto.
- (5) Jenkyns, Michael, *The Sovereign Great Priory of Canada of the United Orders of Malta and of the Temple 1855-2002, The Supreme Grand Masters*, (2003) by Gryphon Jenkyns Enterprises, ISBN 0-9732736-0-7.
- (6) Jenkyns, Michael, *The Cryptic Rite in Ontario: The Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Ontario from 1871 to 2004*, (Spring 2005) by Gryphon Jenkyns Enterprises, ISBN 0-9732736-4-X.
- (7) McLeod, Wallace editor, *Whence Come We?* (1980) Hamilton, Grand Lodge of A.F.&A.M. of Canada in the Province of Ontario
- (8) Reynolds, John W., (2012) *An overview of some significant or interesting contributions during the terms of the Grand Masters of the Grand Lodge of Canada in the Province of Ontario, revisited* 'The Architect' December 2012
- (9) Robertson, J.R., 'The History of Freemasonry in Canada from its Introduction in 1749', (1900), George N. Morang & Company.
- (10) Runnalls, J. Lawrence (1979) *Our Past Grand Masters* privately published
- (11) Morgan, Henry James (1898, 1912) *The Canadian Men and Women of the Time* William Briggs, Toronto



(12) Family information confirmed via Ancestry.com and FindAGrave.com.