

Aubrey White, CMG

Grand Master (1911 – 1913) of the Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of
Canada in the Province of Ontario

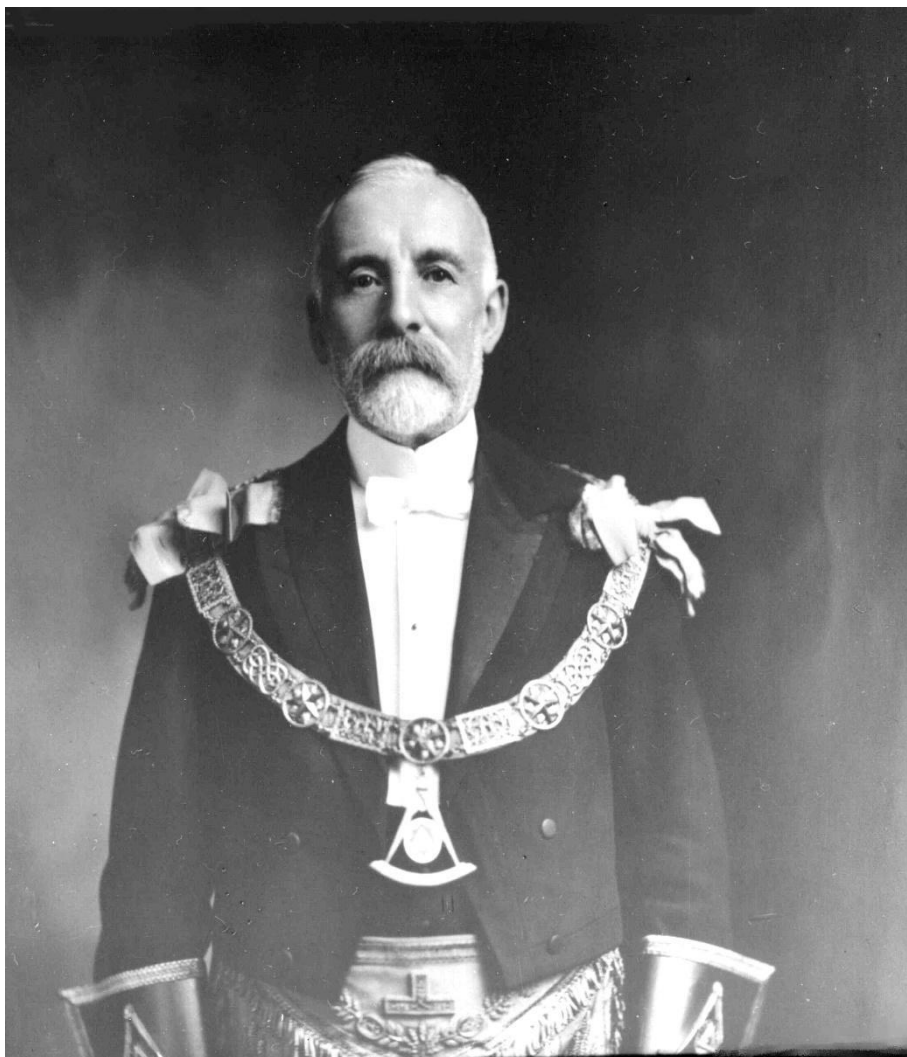


Photo from the Grand Lodge

(1845 – 1915)

Prepared by V. W. Bro. Marshall Kern, with contribution by W. Bro. Ken Veitch.

The *Titanic* sank April 12, 1915. M.W. Bro. Aubrey White was in the 9th month of his two-year term as Grand Master when this disaster dominated the news. Three months later he described the impact in his annual address:

“There are many lessons to be learned from this world-shocking disaster, but this is not the place, nor am I the person, to draw the moral. I record and deplore the

event because many hundreds who belonged to the Craft went down with the Titanic, to whose friends and relatives our sympathy goes out.”

A year later he devoted part of his annual address to another significant world event: Captain Scott (a Freemason) and his companions had died during an exploration of Antarctica. Also in his 1912 address, M.W. Bro. White spoke of rejoicing at the end of the war in the Balkans:

“Let us pray that peace and liberty, which have been strangers in that region, may soon be restored and may, for the future, abide with these peoples.”

As all Grand Masters are called to do, M.W. Bro. White had to administer and manage the affairs of the Grand Lodge. The *Proceedings* record the attention to detail that he gave to every expectation and request. While some of the decisions he made as Grand Master would not be repeated by a Grand Master of our time, his rulings show his principled approach to that high office.

M.W. Bro. Aubrey White died July 15, 1915. One week later was the regular Grand Lodge Communication. The *Proceedings* for that year lament his passing to the Grand Lodge Above and note he will be remembered for his faithful service to the Craft. Part of his funeral eulogy was quoted, noting the Masonic Order has lost “an efficient, wise, and dignified leader.”

To appreciate what M.W. Bro. Aubrey White gave to the Fraternity, we must understand the man.

Aubrey White was born on March 19, 1845, at Lisonally House, Omagh (now Northern Ireland), the son of David White and Margaret Mackenzie. He was educated at schools at Raphoe, Dungannon and Dublin. He entered the Royal Navy as a cadet but failed an examination and enlisted in the 8th (King's) Regiment of Foot. He was disappointed when plans to send the Regiment to Canada were cancelled and he resigned, coming to Canada on his own in 1862.

One of the earliest pioneer settlers in the Upper Canada community of North Falls, (later to become Bracebridge, Ontario), in 1860 was a man by the name of Alexander Bailey. He decided to settle in North Falls because he possessed an entrepreneurial and adventuresome spirit and recognized the great economic opportunity available in the numerous waterfalls and huge stands of trees in Bracebridge and Muskoka. He developed a number of enterprises including a hotel, sawmill, grist mill, and of special note for the purpose of this article, a general store, no doubt one that provided only the considerable basic necessities to meet the needs of the settlers of the day. With his numerous operations he obviously needed staff and the person he chose to be assistant in his general store was a lad by the name of Aubrey White. He had no idea that he was starting the young man on an incredibly successful career in business and public service.

Like Bailey, Aubrey White must have had an incredibly determined and adventuresome spirit to take on the challenge of a new country where he knew he

would be facing an uncertain future containing many difficult and unknown obstacles. He arrived in North Falls in 1862. Why he chose North Falls is not known; perhaps he sensed the great opportunities the north offered in its various attributes—dense forests, rivers, waterfalls and wildlife that was the inspiration for many of the pioneers who came to settle in Muskoka.

White was not destined to stay awfully long in the position of “assistant” in Bailey’s general store. His character and ability were obvious, and he was spotted by AP Cockburn, who was in the process of creating a fleet of large steamships for his new venture, the Muskoka Navigation Company, which, for many years, would provide transportation services for passengers, freight and pleasure cruises on Lake Muskoka, Rosseau and Joseph.

Aubrey White was one of Cockburn’s first employees in 1866 and rose quickly to the position of Captain, piloting the huge vessels on their voyages in the uncharted waters of these large Muskoka waterways. He would have been 21 years old. From there, he joined the AP Dodge Company of New York, USA when they commenced operations in Muskoka harvesting the huge stands of white pine for distribution to world markets. It was in 1878 however, that he assumed a position that would lead him into a long, interesting, and influential lifelong career.

He succeeded George Lount as Crown Land Agent for Muskoka. It was a perfect fit for White. He knew the water and wilderness of Muskoka well; the people and the problems new settlers would face as they struggled to carve a homestead out of dense bush on their Free Grant Land Act properties. He received applications for land acquisition, directed each settler to the location of their property and approved final patents for deeds once the settlers proved they had fulfilled the conditions set out in the purchase agreement under the Act.

During these years, long before the introduction of the federal income tax system, it was a municipal responsibility to levy a tax on their residents based on their income. In the 1879 assessment role he was shown to have an enormous salary of \$200.00 per year.

Aside from his work, he was very socially active during his years in Bracebridge. He served as an officer for the Mechanics Institute (the predecessor of the public library system), Superintendent of Algonquin Park, Warden of St. Thomas Church, assisted in the production of the important promotional and historical book “Guide-Book and Atlas of Muskoka and Parry Sound Districts 1879”, a member of the Agricultural Society and in 1880 became a member of the Masonic Lodge where, several years later, was elected to the lofty position of Grand Master for all of Ontario. Robert J Boyer in his book “*A Good Town Grew Here*”, quotes W.E. Hamilton as noting that Aubrey White was “gifted with a phenomenal memory and could tell the names of all the sitting members of all the parliaments, great and small, of Canada, their antecedents and their constituencies, together with the dates of the various byelections since Confederation”.

He married Emily Agnes Bridgland, and after her death in 1880 married her sister Mary Bridgland, daughters of a prominent Bracebridge family. Aubrey Street in Bracebridge is named in his honour.

Aubrey White was Crown Land Agent for Muskoka until 1882. His success in that position must have impressed his superiors because he was asked to transfer to a more prominent assignment in Queens Park. It was unclear what his duties were immediately following the move but clearly, they were of significant importance because within five years he was appointed Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands and Deputy Minister of Lands, Forests and Mines; a position he held until his death in 1915.

White is distinguished by a number of achievements during his term as Deputy Minister. His succinct definition of the jurisdiction of authority over road allowances along navigable waters, in a letter dated October 15, 1896, to Monck Township in Muskoka, is a good example of his clear view on such matters when he said "...although the freehold of all roads is in Her Majesty, yet the jurisdiction is in the Municipal Council and it is conceived that the Municipality has the same powers as to preventing trespasses upon the particular road reservations..."

Another example of his authority and respect is shown when he dealt with the serious conflict between the Navigation Company and the logging industry regarding the use of the Muskoka River for moving logs cut far upstream down to the mills concentrated in other areas along the shore of Muskoka Lake.

Since the beginning, the Muskoka River has served as a transportation route, especially important in pioneer days for getting people upstream to work in the logging camps and for floating the resulting cut logs down to the mills. To say the river was taken for granted would be an understatement. As Muskoka developed and the Muskoka Navigation Company added more and more steamships to Muskoka Lake and the Muskoka River upstream to the growing village of Bracebridge, conflicts ensued. The logging companies were of the determined opinion that they had absolute domination over the use of the river. Not so, said Mr. Cockburn; he knew *'the times they are a changin'* long before the popular song made that prophecy, no doubt because he saw how the logging companies were rapidly decimating the great Muskoka forests.

The river was increasingly used by his large boats and with logs clogging the route, colliding with, and even smashing holes in the hulls of his expensive crafts, the river was in fact prevented from being a navigable waterway. In 1913 the local MPP, former Mayor and Bracebridge resident Sam Armstrong, met with H. J. Foy, Attorney General of Ontario to discuss the matter of logs blocking the river for navigation and Deputy Minister White was dispatched to resolve the problem.

Into this lengthy dispute waded Aubrey White. He knew the river, he knew the lakes, he knew the log run, he knew the people and he knew the boats; he had done it all. He met with representatives of the logging industry, the Bracebridge Council and Board of Trade and, in spite of industry representatives declaring it impossible, ruled that all logs in the river had to be tied together and towed downstream from



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Bracebridge to the mills safely. To accommodate those involved, the logging companies were given until the end of July that year to remove their logs in this manner and leave that part of the river clear thereafter.

Aubrey White's greatest achievement though, came from another direction. His experience in Bracebridge had taught him the importance of the massive stands of forest that blanketed Ontario and the numerous economic opportunities it provided. But they were of no value if a wildfire swept through them and left in its wake blackened stubs and decimated landscape. Forest fires were the enemy in the rapidly developing Province. Aubrey White set about developing a fire fighting plan for Crown forests for all of Ontario where he recommended appointing fire rangers and building fire towers.

In 1885, the Hon. T. B. Pardee approved his plan, and thirty-seven fire rangers were placed on duty. White's advantage in setting up the system was that he was a skilled navigator, no doubt learned scaling the wilderness of Muskoka and driving big steamboats on Muskoka Lake, so he was at ease venturing into un-surveyed and unknown territory in association with his work.

For his long and distinguished career, he was appointed as a Commander of St. Michael and St. George in 1914. This is a British honour awarded to those who hold high office and render extraordinary and important non-military service. (This is recognizable by the letters CMG after his name. Of note today – 2021 – the Grand Master of the Order of St. Michael and St. George is the Duke of Kent, who is also the Grand Master of the U.G.L.E.)

Aubrey White was Deputy Minister until his death on July 14, 1915. He never severed his ties with Muskoka, and it was at his cottage on Chief Island on Lake Muskoka, after enjoying a day of rowing, swimming and fishing that he suffered a stroke and passed away. He is buried in the family plot in the cemetery of St. Thomas Anglican Church in Bracebridge.



Photo by W. Bro. Ken Veitch

On the fiftieth anniversary of his death, the Ontario Ministry erected a cairn to his honour at High Falls Park in Bracebridge. Over one hundred people from the Provincial Government and across Muskoka attended the unveiling ceremony on July 14, 1965. Deputy Minister of Lands and Forest, Frank A. MacDougall, spoke at the ceremony, noting that since Confederation, Ontario has had seventeen Prime Ministers and forty-two Minister's of Lands and Forest but only six Deputy Ministers; citing that Aubrey White served the longest in that office and was one of the most distinguished.

He mentioned in particular Aubrey White's abilities as an aviator which enabled him to travel extensively over the province to carry out his important work. Incredibly, after more than one hundred years, the Ontario Provincial Ministry of Natural Resources still considers Aubrey White the founder of their forest fire fighting system.

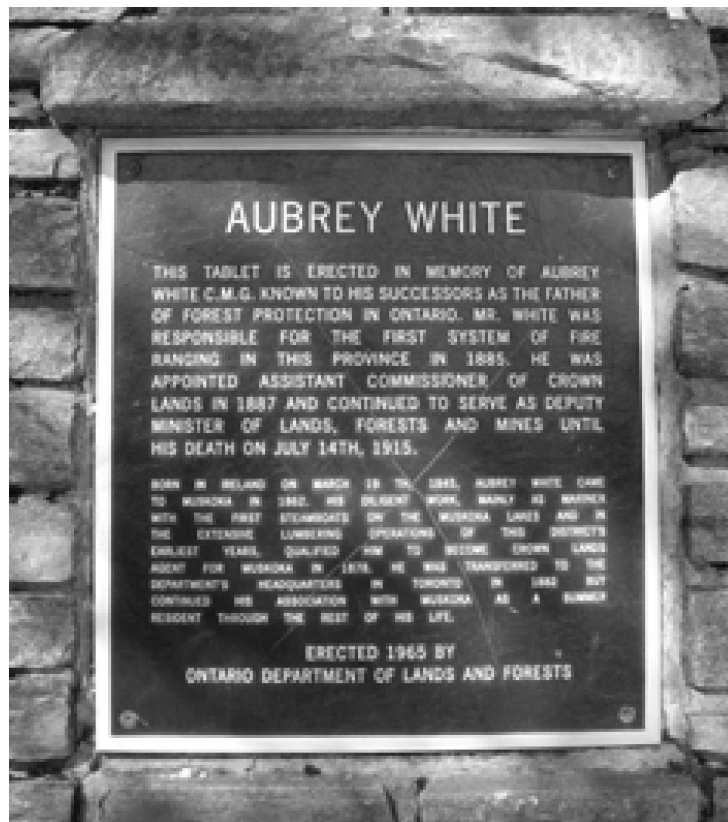


Photo by W. Bro. Ken Veitch

Masonic Career

Mr. Aubrey White was initiated into Muskoka Lodge, No. 360 GRC, Bracebridge on August 22, 1880. After his move to Toronto, he affiliated with King Solomon's Lodge, No. 22 GRC, Toronto and served as WM in 1895. He was elected as DDGM of Toronto District in 1896. He was elected as Deputy Grand Master for the 1909 - 1910 and 1910 - 1911 terms and as the 25th Grand Master of the Grand Lodge A.F. & A.M. of Canada in the Province of Ontario, for the 1911 - 1912 and 1912 - 1913 terms.

In Capitular Masonry, he was exalted in St. Paul's Chapter, No. 65 GRC, in Yorkville (Toronto) in 1889. While details are not readily available, he was elected and installed Grand Third Principal of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Canada in February 1914, but his career in that body was terminated by his early death.

In Knights Templary he was knight in Cyrene Preceptory, No. 29 KT, Toronto in 1899 and served as Provincial Grand Prior for the Toronto District.

He joined the Toronto Chapter of Rose Croix in 1889 and was a member of Moore Consistory, Hamilton. He was a 33^o Inspector General. He was a member of the Provincial Grand Lodge of the Royal Order of Scotland for the provinces of Ontario and Quebec.



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He was a member of Rameses Shrine Temple, A.A.O.N.M.S., Toronto.

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