

Joel Roberts Poinsett

2 March 1779 – 12 December 1851

Compiled & Edited by W. Bro. Robert Mayne



Indigenous to Mexico and Central America, the Poinsettia was introduced to the United States by Joel Roberts Poinsett the first

United States Minister to Mexico who introduced the plant to the United States in 1825.

A South Carolinian born in Charlestown (or London, the records are uncertain), to a wealthy physician, Dr. Elisha Poinsett, and his wife Katherine Ann Roberts.



Joel Roberts Poinsett - 1801

Medium Watercolor on Ivory

Artist—Edward Greene Malbone (1777–1807)

Dr. Elisha Poinsett accompanied an American division sent to co-operate with French General and Admiral Charles Hector comte d'Estaing, in his siege of Savannah during the American Revolutionary War. He

attended the Polish Nobleman, Casimir Pulaski when he received his death wounds during siege .

Elisha's son, Joel Poinsett's formal education began in England where the family lived for six years from 1782 until 1788. After returning to America, he attended a succession of private schools in Connecticut. He is said to have been a good scholar, especially distinguishing himself in languages, both ancient and modern. He became fluent in French, Spanish, Italian, German and Russian which prepared him for the diplomatic career he was to follow.

At about 17 of age Joel Poinsett was sent to England to further his studies and indulge his desire to travel. He attended a school not far from London where he rapidly mastered classical languages. In October, 1797, determined to follow his father's wishes, Poinsett enrolled in medical school in Edinburgh, but a weak constitution intervened and he visited the warmer climate of the south of France to recuperate. On his return he tried in vain to gain access to the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, but as a republican the doors of this institution were barred to him. He was able to receive instruction from Marquois an professor at the Royal Military Academy before returning home to Charleston in 1800.

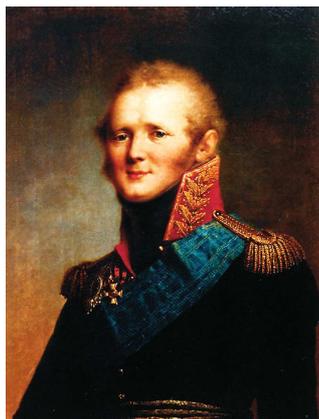
He wished to pursue a military career, but this was opposed by his father who was determined that his son should not shoulder a musket in peace time. Hoping to entice his son to settle into the Charleston aristocracy, Dr. Poinsett had his son study law under Henry William DeSaussure, a prominent lawyer of Charleston. Poinsett was not interested in becoming a lawyer, and convinced his parents to allow him to go on an extended tour of Europe in 1801. DeSaussure sent with him a list of law books including Blackstone's Commentaries and Burn's Ecclesiastical Law, just in case young Poinsett changed his mind regarding the practice of law.

The young Elisha Poinsett journeyed to Europe, travelling through France, Italy, the Swiss Alps, the city of Naples and even hiked up Mount Etna on the island of Sicily. In the spring of 1803 he returned to

Switzerland where he met Aloys von Reding the Swiss patriot, military leader and politician. Later that year he journeyed to Vienna Austria and on to Munich where in December he received word of the death of his father and of his sister Susan's illness.

Poinsett arrived back in Charlestown and took his sister to New York believing the sea voyage would be beneficial to her health. Susan died on arriving in New York and Poinsett travelled back to Charleston. As the sole remaining heir, Poinsett inherited a small

fortune in town houses and lots, plantations, bank stock, and "English funds." The entire Poinsett estate was valued at a hundred thousand dollars.



Csar Alexander I

In 1806 Poinsett travelled to Russia, where Lewis Harris, consul of the United States at St Petersburg, hoped to introduce Poinsett at court to Czar Alexander.

When the Empress learned that he was South Carolina she invited him to inspect the cotton factories at Cronstadt. Harris and Poinsett journeyed by sleigh to inspect the factories and Poinsett suggested improvements to the Dowager Empress, Maria Feodorovna. Interestingly Poinsett did not believe the cotton industry could be successful in Russia because of the necessity of employing serfs who received no compensation and therefore could have no interest in its prosperity. Furthermore, he believed that the institution of serfdom made it difficult for Russia to have a merchant marine or become industrialized. Poinsett believed that only a free and Democratic Republican form of government, as established in the United States, could form the foundation for the development and progress of a nation, but at least a proportion of the population in the United States, would have struggled to understand how serfdom was much different from the burden of slavery in the cotton fields of South Carolina.

At a dinner in the palace, January 1807, Czar Alexander attempted to entice Poinsett into the Russian civil or military service. Seeing Poinsett hesitate he suggested that he travel and "see the Empire, acquire the language, study the people" and then make his decision. Poinsett accepted and

journeyed through southern Russia, accompanied by his English friend Lord Royston and eight others. He travelled to Moscow, a city that would be burned only 5 years later by the forces of Napoleon. Poinsett travelled by the Vlaga river to Astrakhan. On entering the Caucasus the party was provided with a Cossack escort and journeyed between Tarki and Derbent where, fearing the Cossack escort may provoke danger, placed themselves under the protection of the tartar chiefs, believing a larger party made it less vulnerable to attack. As it passed out of Russia proper, they were joined by others including a Persian merchant, who was transporting young girls he had acquired in Circassia to Baku and harems in Turkey. With a strong Persian and Kopak guard, the party left Derbent and entered the realm of the Khan of Kuban.

While traveling through the Khanate, a tribal chief stole some of the horses in Poinsett's party. Poinsett boldly decided to go to the court of Kan in the city of Kuban to demand the return of the horses. The Kan never having heard of The United States had many questions that Poinsett answered speaking at length on its geography. The Khan was impressed and told Poinsett that the head of the guilty chief was his for the asking, yet since the thief had made it possible for him to accept such a distinguished visitor, perhaps a pardon might be in order.

Poinsett travelled to visit the petroleum pits in the Baku region, a pilgrimage spot for fire-worshippers. The Persian khan showed him a pool of petroleum, which he speculated might someday be used for fuel. By 1861 Baku produced about 90% of the world's oil.

Attracted by the military movements in the Caucasus Mountains, Poinsett visited Erivan, and journeyed through the mountains of Armenia to the Black Sea, then through Ukraine, reaching Moscow late in 1807. The trip had been hazardous and Poinsett's health was much impaired. Furthermore, of the nine who had set out on the journey the previous March, Poinsett and two others were the only survivors.

Upon his return to Moscow, Czar Alexander's offered Poinsett a position as colonel in the Russian Army. However, news had reached Russia of the attack of the *H.M.S. Leopard* upon the *Chesapeake*, and war between the United States and Great Britain seemed certain. Before leaving Russia, Poinsett met one last time with Czar Alexander, who expressed his approval of the energetic measures by the Congress of the United States to resist the maritime pretensions of

Britain. The Czar declared that Russia and the United States should maintain the same policy of respect. Poinsett again met with Foreign Minister Count Romanzoff where the Russian disclosed to Poinsett that the Czar ardently desired to have a minister from the United States at the Russian Court.

At this time South Americans were embroiled in wars of independence from Spain. For the first time their ports were open to foreign shipping, free from the stringent restrictions imposed by the Spanish homeland. Seeing these new opportunities to expand its trade, Great Britain had already sent emissaries to Buenos Aires. The American government saw this development with concern, not wishing to let its old Colonial masters encroach into its southern backyard.

In 1809 President James Madison, signatory to the constitution, 4th US President off the United States and Father of the Bill of Rights, decided to be cautious, and to send somebody who could establish proper contacts, start negotiations, and yet a man who was not a career diplomat, so he would not appear as official representative of the American government and would not compromise it. He appointed Poinsett as 'Consul in General'. Poinsett was to investigate the prospects of the revolutionists, in their struggle for independence from Spain.

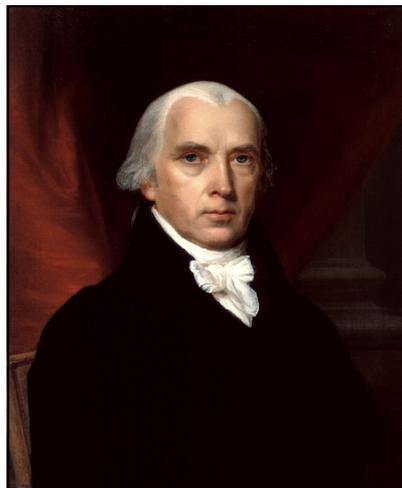
On October 15, 1810, Poinsett left aboard the Niagara bound for Brazil. The voyage was stormy and the captain was not a very able seaman, he lacked a compass and the ship almost floundered on the coast of Brazil. After seventy days, they finally reached Rio de Janeiro on the eve of Christmas, only to discover that the captain was incapable of finding the entrance to the harbour.

Only the next day Poinsett could set foot on land and immediately went to see Thomas Sumter, the American Minister to the Portuguese court in Brazil. It appears that Poinsett became enthralled by the luxurious local flora, because he remained in Rio for several weeks. Shipping was irregular at the time, and he had to wait for a ship to take him to Argentine. Finally, a British vessel arrived, and in January of 1811 he travelled to Buenos Aires.

Poinsett was well received at first, and he started at

once exploring the commercial possibilities of the new nation. He quickly got to meet the leaders of the revolutionary junta, and achieved some minor concessions for American trade. However, his steps were closely watched by the British consul and the local British merchants, who opposed his every move.

Poinsett soon realized that his activities in Argentine had reached a dead end. In the meantime, based on his reports, an appointment arrived from Washington, making him Consul General for Argentine, Chile and Perú, so by the end of November 1811 he took the road to Chile, where he expected to find better opportunities.



President James Madison

Poinsett left us a fascinating description of his voyage, traversing the flat pampas, a wasteland which he compared to the Russian steppes, flat, devoid of trees, with scant, brackish water. He was fortunate not to be murdered by the ferocious Indians, and then came the crossing of the Andes, the imposing Cordillera, which had to be traversed mounted on mules, along mountain paths so narrow that even the beasts of burden sometimes lost their footing and fell with their passenger to the bottom of the gorge. The crossing took several days, but when they finally reached the other side, and Poinsett saw the

fertile central valley of Chile, he believed he had come to a patch of heaven on earth. His journey had lasted 32 days. He reached Santiago on 29 December 1811. The official reception occurred on February 24, 1812. Poinsett was the first accredited agent of a foreign government to reach Chile.

This was a critical time in the Chilean independence struggle. They had the previous year declared their independence on 18 September 1810, but Spanish soldiers still occupied the far south, and the Spanish Viceroy in Peru was preparing to send an expeditionary force to regain control of the country. The independence movement was in danger, and – as later events would prove – independence could not be achieved for several more years.

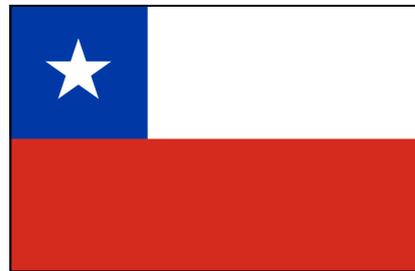
The Larrain and Carrera families were jockeying for power in Chile. By the time Poinsett arrived, the Carreras gained control under its leader, José Miguel Carrera. Like Poinsett José Miguel Carrera was a Freemason and he shared with Poinsett the same devotion for the republican form of government and

for the philosophical ideals of the Enlightenment. Thus, it is not surprising that the two developed an immediate liking for each other. Poinsett, who was older and more experienced, and he soon became a trusted confidant and military advisor to the Chilean ruler.



Flag of the Patria Vieja (1812–1814).

The Chileans were divided, some of them – the wealthy land owners and the Spanish-born - wanted to remain under Spanish rule, while most of the "criollos" – those born in Chile - thought otherwise, but they themselves were divided between those who wanted to gain some form of autonomy while remaining faithful subjects of the Spanish crown, and those who strove to gain complete independence and form a republic, though, to tell the truth, they had little idea of what form that government should take.



Chilean Flag adopted 18 October

In the spring of 1812 the movement to separate Chile from Spanish rule gained impetus. A national flag was created, and the 4th of July was set to formally dedicate the new emblem. Poinsett, who had invited members of the government and some three hundred other Chilean personalities to a celebration in the Consul's residence, was careful to stress the symbolic connection between the Chileans and the Americans. The Stars and Stripes was flown entwined with the three colours of the Chilean flag.

Unfortunately, the festivity was somewhat marred by the disorderly conduct of some American sailors who got drunk and had to be thrown out. In the end they got involved in a brawl, shots were fired, several Americans were wounded, and one died. Poinsett was mortified, but his good relations with the Chilean government remained unaffected. In fact, Poinsett was soon invited to join an even more important project, which marked a new step towards independence: writing a Constitution for the new republic.

Father Camilo Henriquez, editor of the first Chilean newspaper, *La Aurora de Chile*, and six other prominent Chileans were appointed to draw up the document, together with Poinsett. We shall not be surprised to learn that the meetings were held in his home. Poinsett took as his model the recently enacted Constitution of the United States of America, which he

firmly believed was a milestone of political science and a model for all countries of Spanish America. Poinsett's advice was accepted in almost every instance, and the first draft of the Constitution was completed in October 1812.

During this period, a family quarrel broke out between José Miguel Carrera and his younger brother Juan José, who commanded the infantry in the revolutionary army. The dispute could have ended in civil war, but Poinsett intervened, and his arbitration succeeded in restoring the peace between the two brothers. José Miguel, who had resigned to avoid bloodshed, returned to the Presidency of the junta.

Unknown to Poinsett at the time, the United States on 18 June 1812 declared war on the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. The factors leading to this declaration included trade restrictions brought about by the British war with France, the impressment of American merchant sailors into the Royal Navy, British support of Indian tribes against American expansion, outrage over insults to national honour after humiliations on the high seas and American interest in annexing British North American territory, part of modern-day Canada. The war ended two and half years later with the treaty of Paris.

Poinsett's main adversary in Chile was the junta of Peru. The Colonial Viceroy of Peru resented the Chileans' disregard for Spanish authority. He declared the laws of the new Chilean government relative to free commerce null and void and sent privateers to enforce the old colonial system. Seizure of ships and confiscation of cargoes followed, to the dismay of foreign traders, especially Americans. Poinsett learned of the seizure of an American whaler searching for supplies from an intercepted letter from the governor of San Carlos de Chiloe to the viceroy of Lima. Furthermore, he received intelligence that ten other American vessels were seized at Talcahuano in the Bay of Concepción. With little guidance from the Madison administration, Poinsett decided that something had to be done to halt violations of American neutral rights.

Poinsett urged Chile to close its ports to Peru, but the authorities in Santiago did not feel they were strong enough to take such a step. Instead they urged

Poinsett to aid them in obtaining arms and supplies from the United States. Although Poinsett furnished the names of certain dealers, many of them were already too involved with the conflict between the U.S. and Britain to give any attention to the Chileans.

The seizure of American ships by royalist Peru continued. Poinsett's commission stated that he was to protect all American property and provide for American citizens. After a consultation with Carrera, Poinsett accepted a commission into the Chilean army to fight against the Spanish Royalists based in Peru. This was certainly a most unusual activity for a properly accredited diplomat. The US was at war with England, but not with Spain. In fact, the Washington government had declared its neutrality regarding the conflict between Spain and its American colonies.

Poinsett was later given the rank of general in Carrera's army. He led a charge at the head of the Chilean cavalry in the Battle of San Carlos and secured a victory for Chile. From there, he went with a battery of flying artillery to the Bay of Concepcion, where ten American vessels had been seized. He arrived at dark near the seaport of Talcahuano, and began firing on the town. At dawn he sent an emissary to demand the surrender of the bay to the Junta of Chile. The Peruvian royalists surrendered on 29 May 1813.

In early September 1813, the United States Frigate Essex arrived in Chilean waters and cleared them of English whalers and cruisers. When Commodore David Porter of the U.S.S. Essex arrived in Santiago, Poinsett received the first authoritative news of the War of 1812. He now desired more than ever to return to his home. However, this could not happen until Commodore Porter completed his cruise of the Pacific. Finally, as the Essex set out with Poinsett aboard, the Phoebe and Cherub, British warships were spotted in the port of Valparaiso. Commodore Porter returned to Santiago to utilize the guns of the fort there. He also hoped the neutrality of the bay would discourage any British attack. Captain Hillyer attacked nonetheless, and Commodore Porter was defeated. The British decided to send their American prisoners back to the U.S. in a cartel. Poinsett was forced to stay behind in Chile.

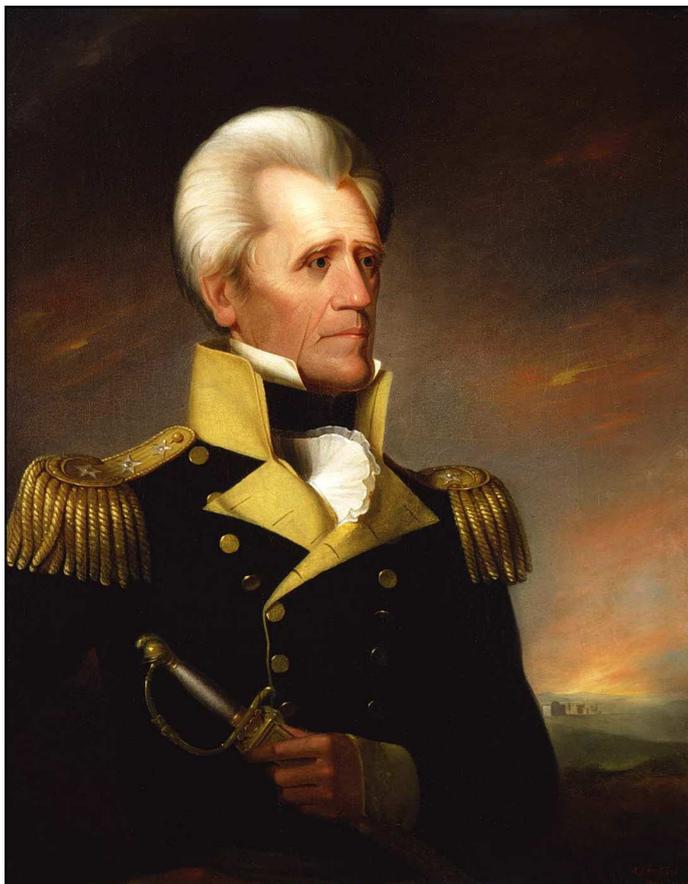
The period of the "Patria Vieja", the old fatherland, had ended, and it would take another war, this time started a few years later with the invasion of Chile by an army led by José de San Martín and Bernardo O'Higgins, to bring about the final defeat of the Spaniards.

When Poinsett returned to Buenos Aires, he found a Junta that was very well established with a strong British influence. He managed to negotiate a commercial agreement with the Junta by which American articles of general consumption were admitted free of duty. As American shipping had been driven from the South Atlantic, it took some time to find passage back to the United States. Poinsett finally secured passage aboard a vessel going to the Bahia, a state in the north eastern part of Brazil. From there he transferred to another ship bound for the Madeira Islands, located 535 miles from mainland Europe. Poinsett finally reached Charleston on 28 May 1815.

Returning to Charleston in 1815, Poinsett spent the first few months putting his personal affairs in order. From now until 1825, Poinsett stayed in South Carolina seeking to build a reputation in his home state, and hold office. Yet, he became to be respected as an authority on Latin American affairs. In 1816 Poinsett received a letter from his old friend General Jose Miguel Carrera.

Since Poinsett's departure, the Chilean Royalists had consolidated their hold on Chile, and after spending a year in exile in the provinces of the Rio de la Plata, Carrera came to the United States in January 1816 to stimulate interest for a revolution in Chile. Poinsett wrote Carrera back stating that he intended to urge the U.S. government to develop decisive policy regarding the Spanish colonies. President James Madison received General Carrera warmly, but never offered him any official encouragement because he worried that seriously entertaining Carrera might jeopardize gaining Florida. Carrera's only hope of help came from his former comrade.

In July 1816, Poinsett travelled to New York to meet Carrera. While there, Poinsett attempted to interest John Jacob Astor, the wealthy owner of the American Fur Company, in supplying Carrera's Chilean revolutionists with weapons; however, Astor declined to get involved. In August 1816, Poinsett was able to arrange some conferences in Philadelphia between the Chilean leader and some of Napoleon's former officers. Among them were Marshal Emanuel Grouchy, who had commanded Napoleon's body guards during the Russian Campaign. Poinsett also arranged a meeting between Carrera and General Bertrand Count Clauzel. Clauzel had distinguished himself in the Napoleonic Wars and was given the distinction of Peer of France by Napoleon in 1815. Although Carrera's movement never benefited from the experience of these French officers, Poinsett did succeed in obtaining contracts with the firm D'Arcy



Andrew Jackson (Old Hickory)
15 March 1767 – 8 June 1845
7th President of the United States
1829–1837
Member of Harmony Lodge #1
& La Fayette Royal Arch Chapter #4

and Didier of Philadelphia to supply arms for the expedition which Carrera was planning.

On August 29, 1816, Poinsett set out on a tour of the U.S. along with four men and one slave from Charleston. He visited Philadelphia then made stops in Pittsburgh and Cincinnati, before stopping in Lexington, Kentucky where he stayed with Congressman Henry Clay. From Lexington, the travelers made their way to Louisville, and then on to Nashville, Tennessee. While in Nashville, Poinsett and his companions had breakfast with Andrew Jackson, who would later become the 7th President of the United States. Poinsett, after traversing more than two thousand miles, finally returned to Charleston in early November 1816.

Poinsett was aware that his friends had nominated him to represent Charleston, South Carolina in the state legislature. In Greenville on his way back home, he learned that he had won the nomination and had a

seat in the State House of Representatives. As he was beginning his first term in April 1817, the rumored position of American envoy to South America became reality. On 25 April 1817, acting Secretary of State Robert Rush offered Poinsett the position of special commissioner to South America stating, "No one has better qualifications for this trust than yourself." Rush also added that he would be personally gratified by Poinsett's acceptance.

Nevertheless, Poinsett declined the honor. In May, Poinsett explained to President James Monroe that he had recently accepted a seat in the legislature of South Carolina and could not resign it "without some more important motive than this commission presents." Poinsett perceived that the mission would not lead to any substantial decision for recognition and was unwilling to give up his seat in the House. In the same letter, Poinsett offered his knowledge of South America to the service of whomever the Monroe administration appointed.

Poinsett's political values mirrored those of others at the time who considered themselves Jeffersonian Republicans. One of the most important measures supported by Jeffersonian Republicans following the War of 1812 was that of federally funded internal improvements. As a member of the state legislature, this was one of Poinsett's passions. After being re-elected to the South Carolina House in 1818, he became a member of the Committee on Internal Improvements and Waterways.

Poinsett also served on the South Carolina Board of Public Works as President. One of the main plans of this board was to link the interior of the state with the seaboard. Another important project was the construction of a highway from Charleston through Columbia, to the north western border of South Carolina. It was designed to promote interstate commerce as well as to draw commerce from eastern Tennessee and western North Carolina to Charleston. Poinsett, a seasoned traveler, knew better than anyone the importance of good roadways. Through his journeys in New England in 1804 and especially to the west in 1816, Poinsett understood that his country could benefit from transportation facilities.

In 1820, Poinsett won a seat in the United States House of Representatives for the Charleston district. As a congressman, Poinsett continued to call for internal improvements, but he also advocated the maintenance of a strong army and navy. In December 1823, Poinsett submitted a resolution calling upon the Committee on Naval Affairs to inquire into the

expediency of authorizing the construction of ten additional sloops of war. As a member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Poinsett took strong views on developments in South America. Poinsett's political views were aligned with such nationalists as Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Poinsett, like many opponents of Clay's American system, opposed the Tariff of 1824.

In 1821 he was elected Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of South Carolina, and that same year he was elected Grand High Priest of the Grand Chapter of South Carolina, holding that office for the next 20 years.

In the presidential elections of 1824, Poinsett supported Andrew Jackson, who lost. John Quincy Adams was elected instead and coincidentally, on 7 March 1825, Poinsett resigned from Congress to accept an appointment as the US Minister to Mexico.

Poinsett already knew Mexico. He had been there in 1822, sent by President Monroe to examine the conditions in the newly independent nation and to determine if the United States should recognize the local government. Mexico was then ruled by Agustín de Iturbide, an army officer who first had fought for the Spaniards, then against them, and finally took control of the country declaring himself Emperor. He was an active Scottish Rite Mason. Poinsett, whose republican instinct made him abhor the trappings of empire, took an instant dislike to the man.

On returning to Mexico in 1825, Poinsett met the new President, Manuel Felix Fernández, better known by his nom de guerre Guadalupe Victoria, who had been elected in October of 1824. Guadalupe Victoria has the distinction of being the only Mexican President to serve his full term during the first 50 years of Mexican independence. He also has the distinction of having abolished slavery in his country.

The conservative followers of Iturbide, however, many of whom were Scottish Rite masons, continued undermining Victoria and doing all they could to bring Iturbide back. They were commanded by the conservative Nicolás Bravo, who had been elected Vice-President in a futile move designed to bring

peace between both camps.

Soon after his arrival, Poinsett was approached by members of newly formed York Rite lodges. These included politicians and military men who wanted to get rid of Iturbide and his faction, and to establish a firm republican form of government.

Once again, Poinsett deviated from his role as diplomat. Although later he would claim that he did not expect the York Masons to act beyond their legitimate functions of benevolence and charity, he could not have ignored the intense political forces that were behind the creation of the competing Masonic bodies. The Scottish Rite Masons, also known as "Centralists" or "Escoceses", were already politicized, and the York lodges, with the help of Poinsett, soon formed their own Grand Lodge, and became the centre of an opposition political force known as the "Federalists" or Yorkinos.



Guadalupe Victoria
29 September 1786 – 21 March 1843
1st President of Mexico

Mackey in his work, *The History of Freemasonry in South Carolina*, records that In 1826 the Grand Lodge of South Carolina received a letter from Poinsett. The contents of the letter are unknown but as a result the following resolution was adopted:

That the Grand Lodge do constitute our worthy Brother, Joel R. Poinsett, the Minister Plenipotentiary of the United States, near the Republic of Mexico, the Agent and Representative of the Grand Lodge, for the purpose of establishing friendly relations with the Lodges of that Republic. That our said Representative be authorized, in the manner of the Grand Lodge, to visit and inspect the working of the said Lodges, and, if deemed expedient, to grant dispensations for the constituting and working of Lodges according to the ancient landmarks, as fixed by this Grand Lodge; with a request that he will communicate to the Grand Lodge such information and advice as will enable it to promote the cause of Masonry in that country.

Whilst the Grand Lodge of South Carolina did not warrant Lodges in Mexico it is believed that Poinsett received warrant for three Lodges from The Grand Lodge of New York. A York Rite Mexican Grand Lodge was soon established and developed with amazing

speed. In the course of five months some eighty-two lodges were established.

As Guadalupe Victoria's presidential term came to its close in 1828, the conservative Vice-President, Nicolás Bravo, a Centralist and Scottish Rite Mason, rebelled and issued a proclamation, known as the Montano Plan, which contained four main points: the first was to prohibit by law all secret societies; second, all ministers were to be dismissed; third, Poinsett was to be expelled from Mexico, and finally, the Constitution was to be rigidly enforced.

Then came about one of the strangest battles of history, fought by armies led by the Grand Masters of two contesting Grand Lodges: Nicolás Bravo was Grand Master of the Escoceses, while Vicente Guerrero was Grand Master of the Yorkinos. The battle took place outside Mexico City and the Yorkinos were victorious. Bravo was sent to exile.

The elections of 1828 were fiercely contested. Although Gómez Pedraza was declared the winner, he was forced to leave the country, and Vicente Guerrero, with the support of Santa Anna, Závala and Poinsett, assumed power.

Poinsett had overstayed his welcome. His active involvement in Mexican political life had become too blatant, to the point that it antagonized even the people he supported. He was unable to fulfil his instructions to acquire Texas and to convince the Mexicans to redraw the border line moving it further to the south.

At his installation as Deputy General Grand High Priest, Royal Arch Masons, 3 April 1830, Poinsett defended his action in helping the Mexican brethren saying: "I have been most unjustly accused of extending our order and our principals into a neighbouring country with a view of converting them into an engine of political influence. In the presence of this . . . assembly and on the symbols of our order which are spread around me and the sacred book which is open before me I solemnly aver that this accusation is false and unfounded--and that if Masonry has anywhere been converted to any other purposes than that for which it was instituted I have in no way contributed to such perversion of its principles."



Poinsett is also associated with the introduction Royal

Arch Masonry into Mexico.

During his time in Mexico Poinsett visited the area south of Mexico City around Taxco del Alarcon, where he found what was later to become known in the United States as the poinsettia. In Mexico the Poinsettia it is called "Flor de Noche Buena" (Christmas Eve flower). The Aztecs referred to the winter-blooming plant as *cuetlaxochitl*; its Latin name is *Euphorbia Pulcherrima* or "the most beautiful Euphorbia." The Aztecs used the plant to produce red dye and as an antipyretic medication. Poinsett, an avid amateur botanist, sent samples of the plant home to the States and by 1836 the plant was most widely known as the "poinsettia." Even though the Mexican natives of Taxco claimed the plants had medicinal properties, Dr. Poinsett was unable to discover any such properties

The poinsettia was first introduced into cultivation and commercial trade by Bartram's Garden on June 6, 1829 at "The first semi-annual exhibition of fruits, flowers and plants, of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society".



The owner of the commercial nursery at the time was Col. Robert Carr, married to Ann Bartram-Carr the granddaughter of the famous American Nurseryman John Bartram. Col Carr received seeds and plants that exhibited "A new Euphorbia

with bright scarlet bracteas or floral leaves, presented to the Bartram Collection by Mr. Poinsett, United States Minister to Mexico."

Whilst Poinsett was responsible for introducing the Poinsettia to the United States, and Col. Robert Carr for it's early cultivation, it was Abert Ecke and his defendants who would make the poinsettia a firm Christmas favourite.

Albert Ecke emigrated from Germany to Los Angeles in 1900, opening a dairy and orchard in the Eagle Rock area. He became intrigued by the plant and sold them from street stands. His son, Paul Ecke, developed the grafting technique, but it was the third generation of Eckes, Paul Ecke Jr., who was responsible for advancing the association between the plant and Christmas. Paul Ecke was a fifty-year Golden Veteran of Oceanside-San Dieguito Lodge #381. His son, Paul Jr. was also a member of the same Lodge. Besides changing the market from mature plants shipped by rail to cuttings sent by air, he sent free plants to

television stations for them to display on air from Thanksgiving to Christmas. He also appeared on television programs like *The Tonight Show* and Bob Hope's Christmas specials to promote the plants.

The Ecke family, who had moved their operation to Encinitas, California, in 1923, had a virtual monopoly on poinsettias owing to a technique that made their plants much more attractive. They produced a fuller, more compact plant by grafting two varieties of poinsettia together. A poinsettia left to grow on its own will naturally take an open, somewhat weedy look. The Eckes' technique made it possible to get every seedling to branch, resulting in a bushier plant.

In the 1990s, a university researcher discovered the method previously known only to the Eckes and published it, allowing competitors to flourish, particularly those using low-cost labour in Latin America. The Ecke family's business, now led by Paul Ecke III, decided to stop producing plants in the U.S., but as of 2008, they still serve about 70 percent of the domestic market and 50 percent of the worldwide market. The sale of poinsettia currently contributes over 250 million US dollars annually to the US economy. In the US the 12th of December is recognised as National Poinsettia day.

All good Masonic stories needs a legend and this story is no different.

A charming story is told of Pepita, a poor Mexican girl who had no gift to present the Christ Child at Christmas Eve Services. As Pepita walked slowly to the chapel with her cousin Pedro, her heart was filled with sadness rather than joy. "I am sure, Pepita, that even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes," said Pedro consolingly. Not knowing what else to do, Pepita knelt by the roadside and gathered a handful of common weeds, fashioning them into a small bouquet. Looking at the scraggly bunch of weeds, she felt more saddened and embarrassed than ever by the humbleness of her offering. She fought back a tear as she entered the small village chapel. As she approached the alter, she remembered Pedro's kind words: "Even the most humble gift, if given in love, will be acceptable in His eyes." She felt her spirit lift as she knelt to lay the bouquet at the foot of the nativity scene. Suddenly, the bouquet of weeds burst into blooms of brilliant red, and all who saw them were certain that they had witnessed a

Christmas miracle right before their eyes. From that day on, the bright red flowers were known as the Flores de Noche Buena, or Flowers of the Holy Night, for they bloomed each year during the Christmas season. Today, the common name for this plant is the poinsettia!



But what happened to man who gave the plant his name? Poinsett requested his recall in 1829 and he returned to South Carolina, to oppose John Caldwell Calhoun, to espouse the Unionist cause in the 'Nullification' quarrels, and to again serve in the South Carolina state legislature, from 1830 to 1831.

Nullification was a States Sovereignty issue. At question was the right of a state to nullify or invalidate Federal law. The public unrest leading to the demands for nullification, was caused by the imposition of Federal Tariffs. Those in favour of nullification argued that the right to nullify unjust federal laws was enshrined in the US constitution. It is worth noting that whilst Poinsett's Unionist party also opposed the tariffs, they believed nullification to be an unconstitutional and sought other means to oppose the tariffs. Ships were sent to Charleston Harbour, troops were deployed and militia formed, and for some time it looked as if the situation could develop into a full scale civil war. Eventually a compromise position was reached, but the fracture in American society had formed, and would not heal until the American Civil War settled the issue of states rights.

In the fight against Nullification, Poinsett was President Andrew Jackson's confidential agent. Between October 1832, and March 1833, his correspondence kept Jackson abreast of the evolving situation in their home state, helping Jackson to craft policy in regards to the crisis. He was occupied thus until 1833, when he married the widow Mary Izard Pringle (1780-1857), daughter of Ralph and Elizabeth (Stead) Izard.

When, we do not know, but we do know that Poinsett became a Master Mason, and served as Past Master of Recovery Lodge #31, Greenville, and Solomon's Lodge #1, Charleston.

Poinsett was Deputy Grand Master of South Carolina and in line for the Grand Master's chair when President Martin Van Buren appointed him Secretary of War. He served in this office from 7 March 1837 to 5 March 1841. He used his position to authorize an expedition in 1838, led by French scientist Joseph Nicholas Nicollet with the assistance of American explorer and military officer John C. Frémont, to survey and map the region between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. Poinsett also authorized an expedition by the explorer Charles Wilkes that reached Antarctica and sailed through the South Pacific Ocean and along the western coast of North America.



He also presided over the second semole war (1835 - 1842) and the continuing removal of Indians west of the Mississippi.

It was Poinsett who appointed General Winfield Scott to escort more than twenty thousand Cherokees on their "Trail of Tears" in which at least a fifth died on the way.

Poinsett reduced the fragmentation of the Army by concentrating elements at central locations and he equipped the light batteries of artillery regiments as authorized by the 1821 Army Organization Act. It is claimed that these improvements gave the US forces a

significant advantage in the Mexican War (1846-1848).

In 1841 Poinsett again retired to his plantation at Georgetown, South Carolina, where he opposed the growing secessionist movement in his state.

During the 1820s, Poinsett was a member of the prestigious society, Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences, who counted among their members former presidents Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams and many prominent men of the day, including well-known representatives of the military, government service, medical and other professions.

He was a cofounder of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science and the Useful Arts in 1840, a group of politicians advocating for the use of the "Smithson bequest" for a national museum that would showcase relics of the country and its leaders, celebrate American technology and document the national resources of North America. The group was defeated in its efforts, as other groups wanted scientists, rather than political leaders, guiding the fortunes of what would become the Smithsonian Institution.

Shortly after leading the Union Party to victory over the secessionists in his native state, Joel Roberts Poinsett became ill with tuberculosis, and hastened by an attack of pneumonia, he died near Stateburg, South Carolina on the 12 December 1851. He is buried at the Church of the Holy Cross Episcopal Cemetery, Stateburg.

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