

History of Freemasonry



The Legendary Period

According to the legends contained in the rituals of Freemasonry, the origins of the Masonic fraternity date from the construction of the Temple of King Solomon, as described in the Bible. The undertaking was so vast that a new form of organization was required to ensure that the Temple was completed in a timely and correct fashion, and this led to the development of organization of the stonemasons and architects into various grades and classes with responsibilities as described in the rituals.

Many of the characters mentioned in the books of Kings and Chronicles in the Hebrew Scriptures are encountered in the context of various degrees of Masonry; they include King Solomon himself, Hiram (King of Tyre, who supplied many of the materials, especially cedar wood, used to construct the temple), Adoniram, and others.

Some of the degrees of the Scottish Rite and other now-defunct degrees date to even earlier periods and other cultures, such as the times of the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness (Book of Numbers) and the mythologies of the Ancient Egyptians, as well as the immediate postdiluvian period of the sons of Noah.

Although some Masonic brothers may take the ritual to be historical truth, there are no true Masonic authorities who give any credence to an actual organization of Masons in ancient times.

What is known is that there were fraternal organizations of the ancient world, both among the pagans and among the Hebrews. In the former case, the organizations were generally connected with the so-called mysteries, of which the Eleusinian Mysteries were among the best known. The most prominent example of the latter is the group known as the Pharisees.

The Mysteries had rites of initiation, division into lesser and greater mysteries, with trials to be passed before receiving knowledge, and secrets to be concealed. The secrets of these Mysteries were kept well enough that later ages can only guess at what some of them were. It is possible that knowledge of the nature of the Mysteries was in the hands of the founders of the Masonic order and gave form to some of the present-day structure of Masonry.

The Pharisees did not have concealed knowledge, but they did have limitations on membership and addressed one another as "chaver" (kha VER), analogous to the usage of Brother or Companion in today's Freemasonry. New members were also required to take an oath to obey the Commandments and the Law in the presence of three members. The Pharisees are viewed quite differently by adherents to Judaism than by Christians; to the latter the term "Pharisee" is given an extremely negative connotation, nearly synonymous with hypocrite. To the Jew, the Pharisaic structure is essentially that which constitutes Judaism of the past 2000 years; the Pharisees were seen as the group that prevented the religion from becoming extinct with the final destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem. A full exploration of the historical circumstances for this divergence of opinion is beyond the scope of this document.

However, some knowledge of Pharisaic practices may have been available to the founders of Masonry; it is also possible that there is only one really effective way to organize a fraternity, and that that way has been persistently and independently discovered repeatedly.

The Mediaeval Period

The generally accepted origin of Freemasonry, until recently, has been in the stonemason's guilds of the Middle Ages. The term "free" in Freemason indicated that the Mason was not bound to the land as a serf, or otherwise restricted as in villeinage or socage, but was free to travel about the country, as was necessary for one whose trade might require construction in many different locations. This was remarkable in an age when almost no one traveled more than twenty miles from his home during his entire lifetime.

Masons in the Middle Ages constructed many edifices, but particular attention has always focussed on the great cathedrals built during that period. In order to construct such marvels, it was necessary to have considerable education in the principles of geometry, arithmetic, and engineering, and the guild of stonemasons, including the architects, became one of the few repositories of learning outside the clergy.

As the wave of cathedral building ebbed and the Renaissance began, it is supposed that the Freemasons of the time sought to maintain their organizations by accepting into membership for discussion of the philosophical and other knowledge of the Lodge, certain gentlemen and members of the upper classes who were not actual workers in stone. It is this process of acceptance, along with the original freedom, that the term "Free and Accepted Masons" comes from. These lodges are then supposed to have evolved into the modern, purely philosophical (or "speculative," as the Masonic term has it) Lodges.

However, two other theories of the mediaeval origin of Freemasonry have recently been advanced. One, whose best known advocate was the late John Robinson (author of *Born in Blood*), suggests that the Masons were descendants of the Knights Templar. The Templars were a powerful and wealthy order of knights during the Crusades who were suppressed by the King of France and the Pope during the early 14th century. Many Templars were put to death, but some survived. Some of the Masonic degrees and orders deal with these events. It is hypothesized that the former Templars preserved their fraternity by disguising it in the form of Freemasonry.

An even more recent theory traces the origin of Masonry not to the stonemason guilds, most of which appear to have simply ceased to exist, rather than converting into speculative lodges, but to persecuted Catholics of the conflict that raged in England during much of the 17th century. Cyril Batham, of the famous Quatuor Coronati Research Lodge in England, suggests that these individuals founded Lodges as a way to preserve their contacts while hiding from the Anglicans during the various Jacobite upheavals. The lengthy hostility of the Catholic Church to Freemasonry would appear to cast doubt upon this thesis, but Batham's reputation is so prodigious that his work deserves serious consideration.

The Modern Period In Europe

The modern period of Freemasonry dates from the founding of the first Grand Lodge on St. John's Day, 1717, in London. Four "old lodges" gathered together at the Goose and Gridiron Ale House and organized the first Grand Lodge.

The time was ripe for an institution of free-thinkers such as Masonry to spread in the Western world. The Enlightenment was beginning on the Continent, while England itself was still in transition to a more liberal state, having cast off the "divine-right" concept of monarchy with James II only a few years previously; the insurrection of "The 15" was just past, with that of "the 45" yet to come. The organizations of Masonry spread rapidly from England to the Continent, particularly to France, Austria-Hungary, and the Germanic states. Shortly, lodges would be organized in the New World as well.

Rival English Grand Lodges

The first Grand Lodge in England was soon to be challenged by a rival organization. Some authors have termed this a schism, but other recent scholarship claims that the rival Grand Lodge originated from Lodges in other parts of the British Isles, notably Ireland. Whatever the case, the new organization sought to attract members by claiming greater authenticity through the use of the term "Antient" as part of their name. The Antient (or Ancient) Masons were also known as "Athol" Masons, from the Duke of Athol being one of their early Grand Masters.

Lodges in the New World

The Ancient and Modern Lodges in England were eventually merged into one organization, the United Grand Lodge of England, in 1813. By this time, however, both groups of Masons had been chartering lodges in the New World. This fact accounts for the great diversity of ritual content among the states in America, although the precise nature of the ritual cannot be determined by examining whether a particular Grand Lodge styles itself as "Ancient Free and Accepted Masons" or merely "Free and Accepted Masons." There is considerable disagreement among scholars as to what the various origins are, in fact, but it appears to this author that the "Ancient" ritual is considerably briefer than the "Modern" version; the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania probably has what is closest to the pure Ancient ritual in use, while a number of states near and along the northern border of the US (e.g., Connecticut, Minnesota, Wisconsin) seem to have the most lengthy form of ritual. A significant difference among states is whether the ritual is kept unwritten or whether a cipher of the ritual is permitted to be used; the presence of a cipher indicates influence by the Modern organization, although recent changes in the introduction of ciphers in some jurisdictions have undermined this particular distinction. (Note that some parts of the ritual, termed the monitorial or esoteric work, have always been permitted to be printed.)

Lodges in the US

The first Lodges in the US were chartered directly by Lodges or Grand Lodges in Britain; after awhile, however, Lodges in the colonies would issue warrants to form new Lodges themselves and eventually organized their own (Provincial, during the colonial period, but independent later on) Grand Lodges. The first truly independent Grand Lodge in America was organized by four Lodges meeting in Virginia. As each had been chartered by a different Grand Lodge in other states, the resulting ritual was a mixture of that in use in the other states. At the present time (1995), there is a Grand Lodge for each of the 50 states, as well as one for the District of Columbia. That is a fairly recent development; until just a few years ago, the Grand Lodge of California had jurisdiction over the Lodges in Hawaii. The Grand Lodges in the United States observe a custom of exclusive geographic jurisdiction (with some few exceptions in Alaska); no Grand Lodge may charter Lodges in the territory of another Grand Lodge. This custom does not prevail in other parts of the world.

Masonry in Latin America

Masonry also reached Latin America during the late 18th and early 19th century, despite opposition from conservative political and religious elements. Their opposition was probably well-founded, as a number of the liberators of South America (e.g., Simon Bolivar) were Freemasons.

Later American Masonic History

Masonry played a considerable role in early American history. Many of the Founding Fathers were Masons (about 1/3 of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and a like proportion of those attending the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787 were Masons), including Franklin and Washington. The tale that a Lodge meeting was held and adjourned to organize the Boston Tea Party, however, is entirely apocryphal. It is probable that some of those who dressed as Indians and dumped tea overboard into the Boston Harbor were Masons, but the Lodge itself was not used to program the event. There are tales of British troops carefully preserving American Masonic property during the Revolutionary War and turning it over to proper Masonic authorities under a flag of truce.

Masonry in America experienced a considerable setback during the 1820's, when a period of Anti-Masonic sentiment reached such a level as to have a candidate run for President on a platform of opposition to the Lodge. During that period, many Masonic bodies turned in their charters and ceased to exist. The uproar stemmed from a fraudulent claim that Masons had executed a turncoat brother in New York for exposing the secrets of the Lodge. Like the Know-nothings and anti-Catholic fever of a few years later, the fanaticism passed from the scene, but it was some time before Masonic bodies returned to their former prominence.

During the American Civil War, Masons fought on both sides, but there are many tales of battlefield kindness rendered to a Brother found wearing a uniform of the other color, as well as stories of prisoners of war allowed to attend Lodge on parole, or Masonic funerals conducted for a fallen enemy soldier.

Masonry played an important role in the social life of a significant number of Americans throughout the later 19th and early 20th centuries. Most prominent members of society were also members of the Lodge, and often, Lodge events were the lion's share of what constituted entertainment in many small towns. Other fraternal organizations arose to compete with the Masons, such as the Grange, the Elks, the Moose, and the Odd Fellows. Masonic charity supported many through hard times, long before the invention of the social safety net in the 1930s.

Membership in the Masonic fraternity reached a peak in the late 1950s and has been declining since that time. Similar phenomena have affected other fraternal organizations, as well as business clubs, churches, and the like. There are a number of explanations advanced for this decline, such as the rise of mass forms of entertainment available in the home, the greater demands of the work and commuting environment, and so on. No one has a certain answer of how the decline may be reversed, but it seems that the prominent role that the Lodge played in the social structure of many towns and urban areas is not likely to be seen again until the overall social structure of the United States changes back to a more outward orientation. Surveys currently show that many American men are simply unaware of the existence of the Masonic fraternity but might be interested in joining an organization of its description; fifty or more years ago, there was virtually no one unaware of the nature of the Lodge.

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