

A SHORT HISTORY OF FREEMASONRY

Lodge System of Masonic Education

The history of Freemasonry is too extensive to be covered in any detail in the few minutes that we have today. I will just touch on some highlights, but I do strongly recommend that you give the subject further study after receiving the three Degrees. This short history will, however, enable you to better understand what lies before you.

Men have formed societies in all eras, and have used ceremonies of initiation, symbols, emblems and means of recognition. Freemasonry inherited many of these from such societies when it came into existence.

The oldest verified existing written record of our Craft is the Regius manuscript, a document written in England about 1390. That was over six centuries ago! That document indicates that even then Freemasonry was very old.

At that time, all Freemasons were "Operative" Masons. They were the designers and builders of the great medieval cathedrals and other structures of Gothic architecture. Their high degree of skill required much knowledge of mechanics and geometry as well as stone-masonry. They were the great artists of the Middle Ages. They were called Freemasons probably because they were free to travel wherever their skills were required, whereas other types of Masons were compelled by law to live and work in the same community, under local restrictions, for their whole lives.

Since it often took several years to complete a building, the Freemasons would organize a Lodge at the building site. The Lodge was governed by a Master, assisted by Wardens. In many respects its organization was similar to that of the Lodges of today.

A long period of training was required for this work. Young boys, ten to fourteen years old, usually served a seven-year apprenticeship. After serving a period of time sufficient to prove his fitness for the training, an apprentice's name was entered into the books of the Lodge, after which he was called an Entered Apprentice. At the end of his seven-year apprenticeship, he was tested to prove his proficiency before being accepted into full membership. He was then called a Fellow of the Craft; equal in duties, rights and privileges with all other Freemasons.

With the coming of the Reformation, the popularity of the Gothic style of architecture began to decrease. This, and other social and political factors, caused a sharp decline in membership during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Eventually only a few small Lodges were left. In Scotland, the Lodges began to accept non-Operative members. During this transition period that lasted about two hundred years, men were received into the Lodges in Scotland and England who had no intention of becoming builders. They joined out of curiosity, or for social reasons, or

because of interest in the Craft's ancient customs and teachings of morality. They were called "Accepted Masons," and we now call them "Speculative Masons." Speculative Masonry means Masonry applied in a moral or symbolic sense. The Speculatives joined slowly at first, but by the early eighteenth century they outnumbered the Operatives and were much more influential.

As a result of the influence of the Speculatives, the Craft took a step that would revolutionize itself. On June 24, 1717, four Lodges of London and Westminster met in London and organized a Grand Lodge, which on the same day elected its first Grand Master, Anthony Sayer. Within a few years of that date, the Craft was transformed into a completely Speculative Fraternity. It had reorganized the two original Degrees into the three Degrees of Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason. It collected and collated the old Masonic Manuscripts. It produced the first Book of Constitutions, and was chartering Lodges in many countries, including America. Membership increased rapidly after the organization of the first Grand Lodge.

Before long, Grand Lodges were organized in Ireland, Scotland and on the Continent. The earliest known Lodge in America was organized in 1730 in Philadelphia. Most pre-Revolution American Lodges were placed under the control of Provincial Grand Lodges run by Provincial Grand Masters appointed by the Grand Lodge in England, although a few of the Lodges had received their charters from the Grand Lodge of Scotland or Ireland.

After the Revolution, the American Grand Lodges became sovereign and independent. Eventually a Grand Lodge was organized in every State (except Hawaii, which is part of California's Grand Lodge) and the District of Columbia, with a total current membership in this country of 1.4 million.

The first Provincial Grand Master, Daniel Coxe, was appointed to oversee in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The early Lodges eventually passed away and left few records behind, so it's now impossible to tell which was the first Lodge organized in New York State. The oldest Lodge still in existence is St. Johns No.1, organized in 1737 in New York City. The Altar Bible of St. Johns was used by George Washington to take his oath of office as the first President, and that same Bible is still used when swearing in the elected officers of our Grand Lodge each year.

In 1751, a second Grand Lodge was organized in England. It came to be called the Ancient Grand Lodge because it claimed to adhere more strictly to the ancient customs. The original Grand Lodge of 1717 was called the Modern Grand Lodge because it had tried to modernize Masonry more than suited the new, more conservative, Ancients.

There was considerable rivalry between the two for many years. It became bitter at times. Before long the Ancient Grand Lodge was chartering Lodges in New York, and the rivalry between the two Grand Lodges abroad was soon reflected here.

When the Revolutionary War started, local Lodge members were on both sides of the struggle. But the Craft officially took no part.

Toward the end of the Revolution, after the old Provincial Grand Lodge had stopped functioning, the Craft was suffering from lack of leadership and control. It happened that most of the dozen or so Lodges in New York City had been originally chartered by the Ancient Grand Lodge of England. These Lodges joined together in a petition to the Ancient Grand Lodge to organize a Grand Lodge here. They were granted a Charter in 1781. The new Grand Lodge elected the Rev. William Walter as the first Grand Master, and it was recognized as the independent and sovereign Masonic power in the State of New York. It has continued without interruption since. This is the origin of our present Grand Lodge, the only Grand Lodge in America to have a written charter.

The new Grand Lodge had many serious problems. The old resentments between the Ancients and the Moderns were slow to die out. Communication with all the Lodges throughout the state was slow and difficult. Some Lodges were reluctant to come under the authority of the Grand Lodge. It was hard for men who fought against each other on the Revolutionary battlefields to come together again as Brother Masons. And because of economic and political conditions, a very bitter rivalry developed between the country and the cities: between "upstate" and "downstate." At times statewide unity seemed impossible.

But the crowning blow came in 1826. During that year, a Mason from Batavia named William Morgan disappeared after a quarrel with his Lodge over an exposé of Freemasonry which he had issued. Several Masons were charged with his kidnapping and murder.

Just prior to this, a movement developed among certain of the churches to eradicate, or greatly reduce the influence of, all so-called secret societies - especially Freemasonry. Simplistically, the principal reason was that many men believed that every secret society was bound to take part in politics, and that control of the government by secret societies would endanger the country. This pile of gunpowder exploded when the disappearance of Morgan dropped into it like a spark. An anti-Masonic movement sprang up; a national anti-Masonic political party was organized; hundreds of periodicals were published, and thousands of men spoke out in an effort to destroy Masonry. They almost succeeded. From a membership of 480 Lodges and 20,000 Masons in 1825, the Craft dropped to only 48 Lodges and about 1,500 members in 1832,

Eventually the Fraternity overcame all this, because Masonry is based on a foundation of truth, and because of the high character of its members, and especially its leaders. Robert R Livingston, a great American statesman, was Grand Master from 1784 to 1800. Following him, General Jacob Morton, Washington's Aide, served five years, and then came the famous Governor DeWitt Clinton, Grand Master from 1806 to 1819. Daniel D. Tompkins, Joseph Enos, Stephen Van Rensselaer and Morgan Lewis followed. It's doubtful whether any Grand Jurisdiction in the world has ever been led for over half a century by a more able group than they.

Since 1860, which is considered the end of the anti-Masonic period, the Craft in New York State has maintained a fairly steady growth with many important accomplishments. A standard

Ritual was adopted. To make the regulation of a growing Craft easier, the state was divided into Districts. Today there are sixty (60) Districts, each one in the charge of a District Deputy Grand Master acting as the personal representative of the Grand Master.

The Masonic Home (now called the Masonic Care Community) was built at Utica to care for indigent and elderly Master Masons, their wives, widows and orphans. It was completely modernized in the 1980s and with the addition of the new Health Facility and Wiley Hall, in the period of 2004 to 2007, is one of the most modern institutions of its kind in existence.

On the same grounds in Utica is the Masonic Medical Research Laboratory; recognized throughout the medical community of the world as one of the leading cardiac research facilities. Scientists delve into the physiology of the heart, into electrical activity at the cellular level, and they isolate and identify genetic defects that contribute to cardiac arrhythmias and heart disease. Pinpointing the causes can lead to effective, specific treatments. The Laboratory's discoveries are award-winning and widely published. Developments there have benefited all of humankind.

We have a magnificent Masonic Hall as our home and headquarters. It is located at 23rd Street and Sixth Avenue in New York City.

Committees have been added or changed as required to keep pace with the growing needs of the membership. From the timid beginnings of 1737, we have grown into a well-organized, ably directed Grand Lodge; a great force in our state for goodwill, charity and brotherhood.

Through an unbroken line, we can trace our heritage back to the builders of the early Middle Ages! We are Masons too, but where they erected buildings, we try to build men. We have transformed their tools into emblems of morality. We have formed their practices and secrets into symbols of Brotherhood, Charity and Truth. We have mellowed and enriched their Rituals, which we use in conferring the three Degrees on our candidates. This is our heritage, and as you join it, you will find it inexhaustible in interest, life-long in its appeal, and a power to enrich your life.