

The Origin and Philosophy of Freemasonry

Its origin is shrouded in mystery. Historians have tried to trace its beginnings, but have been unsuccessful. The truth is Freemasonry was never born, it grew like a coral reef, rising out of the depths of human thought, human suffering and human hope.

It represents the wisdom and experience of the ages, and expresses in true Masonic form the yearnings of the human heart for light and truth, patriotism, tolerance, simplicity and honesty are some of its aims.

Operative Masons in a cold and hostile world, feeling the need of friendship and companionship, bonded together by the bonds of fraternal covenant. They were skilled workmen in an ignorant world, applying their skills to the erection of beautiful cathedrals, their spires courting the favor of heaven. Time went on and the building of cathedrals waned, but the world was still unfriendly, snobbery and class distinction prevailed and men were kept apart by artificial barriers.

Warmhearted men were attracted to Freemasonry because of its possibilities for the development of genuine and abiding friendship, so men who were not operative masons were admitted and Masonry became speculative in character and purpose. Retaining the warmth of its fellowship, these wise men of the past sought to translate the builders into terms of life and the builder's tools into implements of personal development. They set as their goals the building of manhood and the promotion of brotherhood.

Be Strong

We are not here to play, to dream, to drift;
We have work to do and loads to lift;
Shun not the struggle - face it, 'tis God's gift

Be Strong

Say not, "The days are evil. Who's to blame?"
And fold the hands and acquiesce - oh shame;
Stand up, speak out, and bravely, in God's name.

Be Strong

It matters not how deep entrenched the wrong,
How hard the battle goes, the days how long;
Faint not - fight on; tomorrow comes the song.
If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill
be a scrub in the valley - but be
the best little scrub by the side of the hill:
Be a bush if you can't be a tree,
If you can't be a bush be a bit of the grass,
And some highway the happier make;
If you can't be a muskie then just be a bass,
But be the liveliest bass in the lake.
We can't all be Captains, we've got to be crew,
There's something for all of us here,
There's big work to do and there's less to do,
And the task we must do is the near.
If you can't be a highway, then just be a trail,
If you can't be the sun be a star.

If the foundations of our Masonic instructions are implanted in the hearts of worthy men in the first three degrees, then our brethren are ready for further light. We are privileged to offer that light in our Chapter degrees, where we continue to teach by symbolism and allegory.

Symbols are visible objects chosen to typify or represent some idea or quality in something else. The universe is one vast symbol of God. Visible objects, such as trees, flowers, buildings, animals, around us are but symbols of some power or quality in them or in their creator; thus the oak is a symbol of strength; the evergreen, of everlasting life; the lily, of purity; the sword, of war; a temple, a place of worship; a lion, of courage and power; a serpent, of either good or evil; the eagle, of daring and boldness; the ox of patience, a man, of intelligence; the flag of our country, of patriotism. So we might cite instances innumerable. By symbols man learns to think deeply, contemplate long and earnestly, and speculate wisely on his relations and obligations to his creator, his country and all mankind.

There is nothing more interesting, more tragic, or more educational than the periods of history which furnish the background for the Chapter and Council degrees: in the Commandery is brought to light not only some of the old Jewish history, but the principles enunciated by the great teacher who gave to the world the new dispensation of love, truth and tolerance – those virtues most needed in the world today.

Illustrious Brother Charles E. Green sheds further light in his Masonic Potpourri published in 1962 where he describes early Delaware Royal Arch Masonry.

In order to comprehend Capitular Masonry as it existed in Delaware, it is necessary that we have some knowledge of the Rite from the beginning.

No one knows when or where Royal Arch Masonry was born. It has been a gradual development of legends and traditions through the years. Before 1797, both in the British Isles and the United States, there were many so-called degrees (among which was the Royal Arch) that were being conferred by local groups under the assumed authority of a Lodge Charter.

To Thomas Smith Webb should go the credit for bringing order out of chaos and for establishing our rite in the United States under a General Grand Chapter. With vision, energy and force of personality he conceived, founded and developed the Capitular Masonry we enjoy today. Webb was raised in Rising Sun Lodge in Keene, New Hampshire in December, 1790. He demitted to Temple Lodge No 14 in Albany, New York on March 7, 1792 and in 1800 became a member of St. John's Lodge No. 1 in Providence, Rhode Island. On May 18, 1796 he received the then Capitular degrees in Harmony Royal Arch Chapter No. 52 of Philadelphia, Pa.

In 1797 he was High Priest of Temple Chapter at Albany, New York; functioning under a Lodge charter with no definite authority for conferring Chapter degrees. Webb visited similar Chapters in Massachusetts and Connecticut and noting the differences in the work, offered assistance in forming a union of the Chapters which would be beneficial to all.

Out of a Convention of Committees held October 24, 1797 in Boston, Massachusetts, and a Convention of Delegates, held January 24-27, 1798 in Hartford, Connecticut, arose the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the Northern States of America. This was the beginning of our present General Grand Chapter and Webb was the man with the vision and foresight who generously gave of his time and energy in bringing it into existence.

Royal Arch Masonry in Delaware antedates the General Grand Chapter by nine years. The earliest record we have found is in the minutes of Lodge No. 14 of Wilmington, August 6, 1789. This Lodge was chartered under the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, December 27, 1769, and became Washington Lodge No. 1 when the Grand Lodge of Delaware was formed in 1806.

Let us be ever mindful and proud of our heritage as we travel from history to the present. A Mason taking the York Rite degrees advances by degrees known by name and not by number. Every Mason is entitled to and should possess a comprehensive knowledge of the ideals and teachings of Ancient Craft Masonry of which the Royal Arch is the sublime summit.

Probably the most beautiful symbol in Freemasonry is the symbol of the keystone. It does not appear in the symbolism of the Lodge because the Lodge deals with the preparation for eternal life, whereas, the Chapter deals with the completion for eternal life. The placing of the keystone in the symbolic arch of the Chapter represents the completion of the individual temple each Craftsman is erecting.

The degree of Mark Master, the first of four degrees in the Chapter, is highly regarded by Masonic students as being one of the most interesting in Freemasonry. It teaches lessons which have proved of value in all walks of life. The scene is laid in one of the workshops erected near King Solomon's Temple and the candidate is taught many interesting facts, as well as many practical demonstrations of the value of honesty and charity. It belongs to and completes the Fellowcraft degree. The candidate is still laboring on an unfinished Temple. He is taught the nobility of labor and that in the erection of his spiritual temple, he must determine and prepare the materials of which that temple is to be constructed and to have due care that in so doing the work which he shall present, bearing his mark, shall be such as to designate him as one worthy of admission to "that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens".

Man has but one opportunity to build and knows that his work is to be tested by the square of the Great Master Overseer, and yet he builds into that structure work that cannot possibly stand the test. Need he be surprised then if when he reaches the station of the Great Master Overseer, he is told to "stand aside" while more faithful craftsmen receive the rewards of well spent lives.

We are told that "the chisel morally demonstrates the advantages of discipline and education". The mind is one of God's richest gifts to man. It is one of the distinguishing characteristics of man. In its original state the mind is, indeed, like the diamond taken from the ground. It lacks beauty, brilliancy, and luster which we all admire. God gives man the opportunity to discipline and cultivate his mind and make of it a mighty means of usefulness. It is for each man to say for himself what use, if any, he will make of his God-given chisel. If a man fails to do his best to cultivate and develop his mental facilities and powers, it is my humble opinion that God will not hold him blameless on the last day. The diamond of my mind may be smaller and less brilliant than that of my neighbor, but God holds me responsible only for what I do with what he in his infinite wisdom gave me. My obligation is clear and definite.

The mallet morally teaches us to correct irregularities and to reduce man to a proper level so that by quiet deportment he may, in the school of discipline, learn to be content. How much men of the twentieth century need to use the moral mallet to curb ambition, depress envy, moderate anger, and encourage good disposition. Those things that make for discord among men and nations lend themselves to ready control by the proper use of this mallet of enlightened reason.

Wise, indeed is the man who by the use of the mallet of enlightened reason promotes "that comely order which nothing earthly gives, or can destroy. The soul's calm sunshine and heartfelt joy".

Originally the Past Master's degree could not be conferred upon a Brother who had not previously presided over a Lodge. Eventually it was conferred upon all candidates for the Royal Arch degree. The Brother receiving it in that manner is a virtual, not an actual Past Master. It teaches the value of harmony and justice.

The Most Excellent Master's degree is by far the most spectacular in all Freemasonry. It is the only degree that brings forcibly to our attention the completion and dedication of King Solomon's Temple, the very idea upon which all Masonic symbolism is based.

Tradition informs us that at the completion and dedication of the Temple, King Solomon instituted a new order of Masonry. The degree is built around the symbol of the keystone, and the great lesson conveyed is the necessity for things spiritual. It is intimately connected with the Masters degree as the Mark Master is with the Fellowcraft. Here the Mason sees for the first time completed the construction of the Temple on which he has symbolically labored in all previous degrees. Symbolically it represents the building of life and character and the reward which comes to him who faithfully performs his task.

The Royal Arch Degree consists of two sections, the first of which records happenings at the capture and destruction of Jerusalem by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar. The second lies in the building of the second temple by Zerubbabel and is the completion of the ancient Master Mason Degree and the communication of the Mason Word.

Except the Master's degree, no Masonic degree is more important in its historical and symbolic significance than the Royal Arch. In some form it appears on every Rite, but only here does its history, its symbolism, its lessons show so vividly its connection with the Master's degree and the fact that it is, indeed the final chapter of that essential degree of Freemasonry. It brings to light that for which the Mason has searched. Its lessons are the essence of Masonic truth. Its ceremonies for the most part are founded upon the return of the Israelites from captivity to rebuild a destroyed temple, and the discoveries there made.

Companions, you see that the lessons we seek to teach are spiritual values, and that by symbolism we are all workmen seeking our reward, which can only come after the destruction of the "First Temple", that of earthly life; the foundations upon which the "Second Temple", that of heavenly life, can alone be erected.

As an Entered Apprentice, we have all seen the foundations laid deep and strong, and with fervency and zeal have brought forth rough ashlar from the quarries.

As a Fellowcraft, we have skillfully shaped these rough ashlar into perfect ashlar to beautify and adorn our Temple. We have seen the wondrous beauties of the Temple increase under the skillful hand of the Widow's son.

As a Most Excellent Master, we have seen the Temple completed and the last arch bound together by the rejected though priceless keystone. But before we could obtain the object of our long search, our Temple was laid in waste and utter ruin, and we were carried away into captivity. But out of the ruins of Jerusalem a new Temple must arise, and out of the ruins of the Temple of the Present Life must arise the spiritual Temple of a second life.

"We rear not a Temple, like Judah's of old,
Whose portals were marble, whose vaultings were Gold,
no incense is lighted, no victims are slain,
no Monarch kneels praying to hallow the fame,
more simple and lowly the walls that we raise
and humbler the pomp of procession and praise
where the heart is the altar, where incense shall roll,
and Messiah, the King, shall pray for the soul,
the pomp of Moriah has long passed away
and soon will our frailer erection decay,
but the souls that are builded in worship and love
shall be temples of God, everlasting above."

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