

Masonic Age  
By  
John N. Fortner, Past Celebrant

According to Coil's Masonic encyclopedia, the Ancient Charges did not require any particular age in order to be an Operative Apprentice Mason. The first Speculative Constitutions (1723) specified in Charge III of "mature and discreet age", while Charge IV, adopted at the same time, inconsistently required 'no man under 25 years unless by a dispensation from the Grand Master or his Deputy'. This was the Grand Lodge of England law until 1784 when the age was reduced to 21. During this period, though the Grand Master doubtless exercised the power of dispensation, it became the custom without dispensation to admit "a Lewis". A Lewis is a son of a Freemason and the Constitution of the Grand Lodge of Scotland permits a Lewis to be initiated at age 18 and the Grand Lodge of England by dispensation even though not a Lewis. Until recently in the United States an age of 21 was required. There have been instances in Pennsylvania, according to Coil, of the making of a Lewis in this century. George Washington, though not a Lewis, was initiated under age 21. Our 25 Landmarks, number 23, says of "and of lawful age".

In the Masonic Service Association Short Talk Bulletin (February 1935) a very worthwhile history of the derivation of the Lewis is made and an interesting account of part of the original Prestonian lecture reads:

*"What do we call the son of a Freemason?"*

*A Lewis.*

*What does it denote?*

*Strength.*

*What is the duty of Lewis, the son of a Mason, to his aged parents?*

*To bear the heavy burden in the heat of the day and help them in time of need.*

*His privilege for so doing?*

*To be made a Mason before any other person, however dignified by birth, rank or riches unless he, through complaisance, waives this privilege."*

As the Lewis in an older day helped his father in his Masonry in an operative way, so the present day Lewis may be a symbol of sustaining strength to his father's Lodge and Masonry in general, in the years to come.

In 1972, the Grand Lodges of Idaho and North Dakota passed legislation to permit petitions for and initiation of 18 year old candidates. Other Grand Lodges have voted down proposals to lower the age requirement and, of course, each Grand Lodge will make its own decisions in the future but let us briefly review the problem.

First, we see that being at least age 21 has not always been a strict requirement and certainly has none of the aspects of a Landmark! What we really seek in a petitioner is that Old Charge number III requirement that "he be of mature and discreet age". We further must agree that maturity and discretion vary greatly with each individual—his education, both in schooling and from personal experience, and his general outlook on life.

The citizens of the United States have lowered the voting age of their youth from 21 to 18. We must assume our people generally agreed that age 21 was too old. No doubt many 18 or 19-year-old youth vote with more knowledge

and judgment of the facts than some 25 or 45-year-old voters. Certainly they have been exposed to more earthly knowledge in our schools, much more widespread travel and TV exposure than most of us were in our carefree, less mobile childhood days.

North Dakota's Grand Lodge made Masonry available to Masonically inclined youth, including DeMolays, before they are influenced in other directions by the varied interests thrust upon them by military service, college, marriage, etc., which often take them away from the home community environment and Masonic ties to vocations away from home. This is particularly true in the smaller towns in less populated areas. Their youth leave for greener pastures and this unduly delays any thought of entrance into the Masonic fraternity for many years or until they often feel they are too old. I ask you why not open the door for the serious thinking young man of good report in your community to come under the guiding influence of Masonry.

You still have the right to not accept the man who is not ready for Masonry whether he is 18, 19 or 40 years old. Many Lodges are sorely in need of young blood to keep their lodges a living vital force in their communities. A few young men each year could have the advantage of having some older, more experienced Brothers available in the Lodge to give them good counsel and assistance as they in turn become ready to take over the reins. Many of us have experienced being in organizations that have become weakened by attrition and with no infusion of fresh blood. Have you seriously considered the rising death rates in most of our Lodges each year, because of the older ages of the Brethren in the Lodge? We need balance in our age groups in each Lodge, Brethren. We need some young men to offset the growing number of older men in the Lodge. It was not always so.

The old Lewis system—by bringing in the sons of Masons at lower than usual age, creates a liaison group to other youth in the community. Young men will be more attracted to organizations that already have some young men as members. Hopefully, wholesome serious minded young men might be willing to join us at a younger age. The question of effect on DeMolay is pertinent. In many communities we find 18 year olds, that feel they are adults. Some have moved away from their Chapters for college, military service or other vocations and feel they have outgrown a boys' organization. We talk about the 'communication gap' between parents and their children and adults in general and our youth, but stop and consider that there is a great communication gap between 18 or 20 year olds and 13 to 14 year olds. They have little in common. Should we continue to shut the door in the faces of 18 or 19 year olds when they are ready, instead of making it possible to join with us if they are ready and meet our basic criteria's. We are bound to suffer for neglecting them. DeMolay is a valuable preliminary training ground and the transition is easy and natural and similar to going from high school to college. I can speak from personal experience, as a member of DeMolay.

The lowering of the age for entrance will no doubt be adopted by other Grand Lodges as the merit of the move in their overall plans for the future becomes apparent and the Brotherhood demands it. A few years ago the lowering of the voting age was not seriously considered by most of us, but time marches on!

Presented before Delaware College, MSRICF  
May 29, 1997

**GRAND LODGE  
OF THE  
MOST ANCIENT AND HONORABLE FRATERNITY  
OF  
FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS OF NEBRASKA**

201 MASONIC TEMPLE

**FRANK J. MATTOON**  
Grand Master

OMAHA

October 16, 1973

To All Nebraska DeMolays:

At the 1973 Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Nebraska, Masons affirmatively expressed their admiration and respect for the DeMolays of Nebraska by lowering the age of eligibility to the Masonic Fraternity from 21 years to 19 years. As Masons we have great confidence in the DeMolays and are very much impressed with the noble work performed, in the areas of ritual, general activity and leadership.

As has been explained to you, one of the Landmarks of Masonry is that each individual must make a separate application of his own free will and accord and without the influence of any other person upon him. This is one of the basic reasons why Masonry has endured over the centuries as an influential institution founded upon the individual merits of each member.

The above is to say we cannot invite you individually to join but can extend to you our hope that you have an earnest desire to become associated with us in this great and good work.

I extend to you congratulations upon your preferment in your present endeavors and desire to become better men through your association with DeMolay and express the feelings of all Masons that in you we recognize the virtuous qualities of men.

Fraternally yours

Frank J Mattoon  
Grand Master of Nebraska

