The Story
Of
Freemasonry

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During the thousands of years before the first beginning of civilization when men lived in tribes the majority of those tribes made much use of ritual and had many secret fraternities. Boys from twelve to fourteen were made full members of the tribe by initiations, in which they were given secrets, grips, words, and tokens. Even to this day, such peoples as still live under primitive conditions (as in the Amazon valley) continue the same ancient practices.

Among the islands of the southern Pacific a number of native peoples have a building set apart for such initiated youths and for unmarried men. Everything about it is kept secret. The men of the tribe hold meetings in it similar in form to lodge meetings. They call it "the Men's House." In one form or another the Men's House is as old as mankind.

For many centuries after they first came into existence the earlier civilized nations had religions organized in a public form. A religion was a part of the state. Priests were public officers. Temples were public buildings, so much so that their very design, with their porches, pillars, columns, colonnades and spaces, made them almost as open as a public square.

At some unknown date, but probably at about two thousand years before the Christian era, there came into existence religious organizations (or fraternities) of a wholly different kind. They were called Mysteries, and in the literature of modern times may be called Ancient Mysteries or Mystery Cults. (The word "mystery" as here used came from a very old term which meant "secret," "to close the eyes.")

Among them all the most powerful, and also the most famous, were the Eleusinia, Greater and Lesser, of Greece; and Mithraism, of Rome. The latter was so popular in the Roman armies that soldiers erected temples, called mithrea, wherever they were stationed, in all the regions from Ireland to the Danube, and from the Baltic to Egypt.

The larger number of these Mysteries and allowing for local variations, acted on petitions for membership by means of a secret ballot, accepted members by initiation, had local bodies and rooms similar to modern Masonic lodges, divided their members into grades, had a charity fund, used passwords, signs, grips, tokens, symbols. A few of them were so similar to modern Freemasonry that more than one Masonic historian has believed that the Craft may have descended from one of them.

During those same centuries associations of another form were common throughout the countries of the ancient word. No general name for them has ever been adopted but for the most part they are called ancient gilds or collegia. (The latter term is the plural of the word collegium.)

In any given community the men engaged in any one craft, art, trade, or profession had their own local association. All the local associations in any one craft acted according to the same general rules.

The word collegia came into use in Rome, and it was in that empire that these associations reached their widest use and most perfect form. A Roman collegium had a room of its own, a set of officers very much like Masonic officers in a modern lodge, initiated members after a ballot, used rites, ceremonies, and symbols.

Once in a while the craftsmen in a given craft, art, or profession had both a system of collegia and a Mystery of their own. This appears to have been true of builders and architects, and there is a reason to believe that this was true of the Tyrian workmen whom Solomon called in to design and construct his great capital enclosure, including his temple.

The Dark Ages began when barbarian tribes from the north and east began to invade the civilized nations around the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. (They destroyed the city of Rome itself in the fifth century.) Universities, schools, the fine arts, the Ancient Mysteries, the collegia, all of these they were swept away except in a few isolated centers.

When at the beginning of the Middle Ages, the Europeans began once again, though very slowly, to rebuild civilization, one of the first steps was to train skilled craftsmen, and to have the craftsmen form associations. Those associations were called gilds. Had any of the old collegia remained in existence? If so, were the gilds an outgrowth of them? A number of historians believe that some such thing may have occurred, but the majority are of the opinion that the gilds of the Middle Ages grew up independently, and had never had any connection with the collegia.

There was, however, a connection of another kind, and it is of the largest importance. The Mysteries and the ancient craft associations had permeated whole populations, over many centuries, had left profound influences at work in religion, art, culture, science, and social customs, had loomed large in both literature and art, and especially in folklore and mythology. These influences and effects were not destroyed by the barbarians, survived the Dark Ages, and became a part of the general culture of Europe after the Middle Ages began. The men who formed the earliest gilds in the Middle Ages lived in the midst of that general inheritance.

Those Masonic scholars who have, with so much laboriousness, traced back the history of our present Fraternity of Freemasonry have found intimations and indications of a number of origins of it which reach back to those earliest gilds of the Middle Ages. These men, like scholars in other fields, have adhered to written documents and substantial traditions, and have avoided theories and guesswork as much as possible. These researches have led them back to a period in European history which may be conveniently indicated by the year 1000 A.D.

At that time a builder was called a mason. The building craft as a whole was called masonry. Like all other crafts at the time masonry was organized in a form of association which was called a gild. A gild had its own form of organization, its own officers, its own rules and regulations, and it had a complete monopoly of its own kind of work.

In the mason craft as a whole there were many different kinds of workmen, such as quarrymen, slaters, wallers, rough masons, tilers, plasterers, stone cutters, etc. Each of these kinds had its own particular gild. A local gild had a monopoly of its own work within its own territory, or jurisdiction; it was not permitted to go outside it, and outside workmen in turn were not permitted to work inside its limits. Such gilds were stationary.

An exception to that general system were those masons who were what we should nowadays call architects. They received an especially long and arduous education which consisted partly of training in skill, and partly of schooling, had to understand engineering and geometry, could carve, could produce sculptures, understood mosaic, could make stained glass windows, and could design a vast cathedral which might cover more than an acre of ground (they designed and constructed about 1500 cathedrals).

Because they worked with freestone, which could be carved, because they were free men (and not serfs or bondsmen), were free to move from one place to another as their work demanded, were given the "freedom" of the towns in which they worked, and for other similar reasons, they came to be called Freemasons. It was those Freemasons, and not the building craft in general, who fathered and founded that which ultimately developed into our own fraternity.

When a group of such Freemasons (twenty, or thirty, or fifty) moved to the site of a new building their first care was to arrange homes for themselves and families; that done, they next erected a building for their own uses, which they called "the lodge." (They also called the body of men who met in it "the lodge.")

This was their own headquarters for as long as they continued to work on that particular building. When they had completed the building they dissolved their lodge, and moved away. During the years of the existence of such a lodge it was ruled and governed by a Master of Masons who was assisted by what we should call wardens; they also had what we should call a treasurer and secretary, and they had a guard to stand outside the door to keep away all persons who were not permitted to enter.

The indications are that in the middle of the fourteenth century the Freemasons began to make their lodges permanent, not many at first, but in increasing numbers as time passed. According to public law at the time a permanent body had to have a charter, and was not permitted to meet without one.

The Freemasons met this requirement by having a professional scribe draw up for them a document which was approved by the civil authorities. In it were the lodge's rule and regulations. On it new members took their obligations.

Gradually there grew up the rule that if a small number of regular Freemasons could get a copy of that document (such copies are now called "versions") they could on the strength of it organize a new lodge. Such lodges were called "self-constituted." More than 150 of these versions have been collected by scholars throughout the world. In the past half century they have come to be called "The Old Charges."

During the earliest periods the Freemasons probably admitted into their lodge circles an occasional non-working member – what we should nowadays call an honorary member. (A number of kings were honorary members of gilds.) At a later period, and more especially after the number of permanent lodges had increased, non-operatives were admitted into full and active membership. They were usually called "accepted Masons."

Then and since, these members who did not make Freemasonry their means of livelihood have been called by a number of different names, such as Non-Operatives, Accepted Masons, The Acception, Geomatic Masons, Gentlemen Masons, Speculative Masons, etc.

In 1600 the number thus accepted was probably small, but it steadily increased during the century following. By 1700 there were many old lodges in England, Scotland, and Ireland, possibly 200 of

them, most of them very small. Some of them were wholly operative, some were wholly speculative, and others were mixed.

From the beginning, the Freemasons had recruited their membership by means of apprentices. If a lad of twelve or thirteen petitioned and came well sponsored he was examined, obligated, charged, indentured, and entered. He then went to live in the home of the master mason to whom he was indentured, and continued to work for that master for a period of years, usually seven, and received no wages. Around these apprentices there grew up a body of rites, ceremonies, customs, rules, and regulations.

At the end of his term this apprentice then had to prove his skill; if he did so successfully, and if his record was otherwise clear, he was passed into full membership. Insofar as he was then on a level with other members, could work for wages, and could have apprentices of his own, he was called a fellow of the craft ("fellow" having the meaning of full member); insofar as he had learned his art he was called a master mason. Around this passing there also grew up a body of rites, ceremonies, rules, and regulations.

At the same time, the Freemasons had many secrets. They held their meetings behind tiled and guarded doors, used passwords, grips, signs, and tokens, employed emblems and symbols, had their own teachings. Their intellectual life went on at a high tension because it was necessary for them to understand eight or ten difficult arts and sciences. They had feasts and processions, extended relief, and cared for their own widows and orphans.

Such were Masonic lodges at the beginning of the eighteenth century. In 1716 a few old London lodges (the names of four are known) held a meeting to discuss the setting up of a general center for themselves in and around the city. In June of the following year they met a second time, and there and then organized what they called a Grand Lodge, chose a Grand Master for it, and two Grand Wardens. From then on this new body met four times each year. It proved in the long run to be the Mother Grand Lodge of the World, and out of it came that Grand Lodge System which has ever since been Freemasonry's form of organization.

Out of it there developed a number of growths and changes of the very largest importance. The Craft became wholly Speculative. In 1723 it published its "Book of Constitutions," upon which afterwards were patterned the Constitutions of all other regular Grand Lodges. It set up a systems of charters, the results of which was that afterwards there were no more self-constituted lodges. Lodges were left with their old rights and prerogatives for the most part, but all the general laws to govern the fraternity were henceforth enacted by Grand Lodges.

By 1717 the old bodies of ceremonies, customs, rules, and symbols which had formed about apprentices and fellows had become crystallized into what are now called degrees. The evidence indicates that two degrees were used. During the years between 1725 and about 1740 a new development began of which the result was a new third degree. It is almost certain that the materials which went into it had been a long time in use. It was the form taken by the degree that was new, not its content.

Not long after 1717, and using the first Grand Lodge as their model, Grand Lodges were set up in Ireland and Scotland, and at one time or another at least four other Grand Lodges were set up in England, three of them for a brief time only. In 1751 a second Grand Lodge was formed in London itself which proved to have in it so much vitality that it and the original Grand Lodge divided England

between them until 1813, in which year they were united. Almost from the first, these various British Grand Lodges issued dispensations and charters to Freemasons in other lands.

The oldest minute book of an American lodge thus far discovered shows that a lodge was at work in Philadelphia in 1729. It may be that lodges were at work before that time (there is a rumor of one at Boston as early as 1720), and it is very possible that there were other lodges at work in 1729 and thereabouts. If there were not it is difficult to know what use Benjamin Franklin found for so many copies of the "Book of Constitutions" which he reprinted at Philadelphia in 1734 (the first American Masonic book).

In 1730 the Grand Master of the Mother Grand Lodge appointed Daniel Coxe, an eminent Colonial leader, to be Provincial Grand Master in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. There is no evidence to show that he ever convened a Provincial Grand Lodge or warranted any new lodges.

In 1733 Henry Price returned from England to his home city of Boston, Massachusetts, with a written authorization from the first Grand Lodge to be a Provincial Grand Master and to warrant lodges. In that year he set up the First Lodge of Boston, and at the same time established a Provincial Grand Lodge.

From that date until well toward the period of the Revolutionary War other Provincial Grand Lodges were set up in what is now the United States, upon authorization from the Mother Grand Lodge of 1717, or the Ancient Grand Lodge of 1751, or the Grand Lodge of Scotland, or the Grand Lodge of Ireland (sometimes indirectly), and a few lodges were warranted from the West Indies or from France. In theory American Lodges were responsible to those Grand Lodges abroad; but since it took from three to five months to carry on communications across the Atlantic (usually) they were relatively independent, and were left very much to their own devices.

After the war had begun, and even after it had come to an end in 1781, these American Provincial Grand Lodges were loathe to sever ties with the Grand Lodges abroad, not for political reasons but for Masonic reasons, and because they did not see that a war had anything to do with Freemasonry itself.

Inevitably, however, each of them came sooner or later to transform itself into a sovereign and independent Grand Lodge, one to a state, in some instances two or more Provincial Grand Lodges uniting to do so.

Early in the Revolutionary War a movement was set on foot to have one Grand Lodge for the whole of America. Similar attempts were made until the time of the Civil War, but from the first the movement was foredoomed to failure because it was never practicable.

During the first quarter of a century of their independence the people of the young nation were disturbed by flying rumors, uneasy in mind, visited by fears of machinations from abroad and carried away into new cults and movements, some of which were bizarre in the extreme. In the midst of this unsettled condition there began to be bruited about a number of rumors about Freemasonry to the effect that it was in a secret conspiracy to seize control of the government, that it was a tool of interests in Europe, that it was a rival of the church, and other such baseless vagaries.

What appeared to be the mysterious disappearance of William Morgan, of Batavia, New York, in 1826, acted like a spark in a train of powder. The Masons were accused. An Anti-Masonic Crusade suddenly exploded with the violence of a typhoon, and for a number of years it threatened to destroy Freemasonry out of existence in the United States. After it had died down in the eastern states it was

revived in Ohio, and from that center began to seek to destroy the Craft in the Middle West. It was revived a third time at the end of the Civil War (President Andrew Johnson was a Mason). The third attempt to revive it was failure, and from that time until now the Fraternity has met with no serious threats. America, which had examined and analyzed it down to the last small detail, placed upon it the stamp of America's approval.

In the meantime, and in spite of the Anti-Masonic Crusade, there had been going on inside of Freemasonry itself a movement of scarcely less importance. In 1797 Thomas Smith Webb published his Monitor, and at about the same time, so it is believed, he received from England the version of the Esoteric Work which had been approved by William Preston. This was the beginning of the Webb-Preston Work.

But that Work was not everywhere adopted, either officially or in practice; instead, and in many of the states, lodges were left free to choose whatever particular version they preferred. The result was, and up to a point, that there was a certain amount of confusion among the Craft in ritualistic matters. The way out was found when one Grand Lodge after another, each acting upon its own responsibility, adopted its own Standard Work. This, to repeat, was of paramount importance because to a large extent Freemasonry is what the ritual says that it is, and if the ritual could be altered in any fundamental way Freemasonry would be altered with it. Nothing helped more to establish unity and harmony among the many American Grand Jurisdictions than the adoption of a system of Uniform Work.

During that same period the Craft wrote another great chapter in the history of its self-organization in the vast stretches of America. From the days of Webb himself, until the last state was Masonically developed, there came into existence, one after another, a series of Grand Bodies which had authority over other rites, Royal Arch Masonry, Cryptic Masonry, Knight Templarism, and the Scottish Rite. At the same time and also from the beginning, American Masons were determined that these Rites should not each one exist in a vacuum, with the danger that American Freemasonry might split into five Freemasonries, but that all five of the Rites should be brought into a single unity without impinging upon the complete independence and sovereignty of any one. This, which was one of the most magnificent accomplishments in the long history of Masonic statesmanship, was brought about by the practice of Masonic Comity, by which is meant that each Rite has its own official relations with each and every other Rite, nationally, within each state, and locally.

Shortly after the Revolution there began that which one historian has called "the Epic of America." At first individually or in small bands, on foot or on horseback, then in caravans and processions, and with their numbers greatly accelerated with the opening of the Erie Canal, there began that settlement of continental United States. This was not a foray of adventurers, it was not even a migration, but was the movement of a whole population, slow, vastly impressive, orderly. The Tennessee, Kentucky, and Ohio countries were settled first. When the crescent of advance reached the Mississippi, St. Louis became its capital; from that point the movement fanned out toward the Southwest, the Far West, and the Northwest. Wherever it advanced, up the rivers, through the passes, along the trails, all the companies of its carried the same flag, and wherever the flag went Masonic lodges went with it. The Masonic settlement of America was one chapter in the national settlement of America.

Filling one page of that chapter is a record in which Iowa Masons will for ever have an abiding interest. On November 30th, 1840, acting upon a Dispensation granted by the Grand Loge of Missouri, a small band of Masons in Burlington organized the first lodge in Iowa Territory. The next three succeeding lodges also received Dispensations from that same great Mother of Masonry in the Middle West. In 1844, at Iowa City, the four organized the present Grand Lodge, A.F. & A.M., Iowa.

Those of us who stand at this end of time are therefore the heirs of a very long tradition indeed. The Fraternity of which we are the sons, including all in it which we have to use and to enjoy, came to us from a far fore-time, and was prepared for us by generations of toiling fathers. He must be a man bereft of both memory and imagination who does not feel for that history, which has become white with age, a sense of awe and of wonder.

Those centuries were volcanic with world changes. Into them the Crusades came, the Renaissance appeared, the Reformation triumphed, the New World was discovered, the steam engine was invented, electricity was discovered, and in our own day the world appears to have come to an end in the two mightiest and bloodiest wars in the annals of man. What is there in our Fraternity which has enabled it to survive that succession of revolutions and cataclysms, and not only to survive but, and in spite of all, to prosper? By what magic was that fraternal bridge thrown across the centuries?

Those who have thought and studied much can give the answer. In Freemasonry is a great teaching. It is not embodied in textbooks, promulgated in the form of creeds, or enforced as dogma, but is organized in the structure of the Craft, enacted in its rituals, exhibited in its symbols, and expounded in its lectures. It is Freemasonry's great secret and therefore is the secret of its history.

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