

MASONIC COOPERATIVE EDUCATION PROGRAM

On behalf of your Scottish Rite friends in the Valley of _____, I am pleased to present to you a discussion of a brief history of Freemasonry. This presentation is a part of the Masonic Cooperative Education Program sponsored by the Scottish Rite and endorsed by our Grand Lodge.

Although some would like to say that the origins of Freemasonry can be traced all the way back to the building of King Solomon's Temple, scholars today are almost in universal agreement that Masonry is of much more recent origin. The earliest reference to a "Freemason" is contained in a document known as the London Coroners' Rolls for the years 1325-1326. This document contained abbreviated information about people dying in England during that period of time. An individual who died was referred to as a "Freemason," and his profession was no doubt an Operative Mason. The terms "Freemason" and "Mason" are used interchangeably, and many believe that "Freemasonry" referred to skilled craftsmen who could shape soft ("free") stones.

Masonry is the world's oldest and largest fraternity. It had its actual roots in Operative Masonry involving actual stonemasons who were involved in medieval building projects. These groups organized themselves into lodges or guilds which would be similar to a modern-day trade union. Because there was a necessity for determining different skill levels, the Masons were divided into different grades of ability. Because most people were illiterate in those days, the Operative Masons developed certain grips and secret words so that they could recognize each other as they traveled from job to job.

Sometime in the late 1600s and very early 1700s (there are no written records), the operative lodges in London, England, began holding quarterly meetings which were discontinued for unknown reasons.

Modern Masonry is generally considered to have begun in London in 1717 when four old lodges formed a Grand Lodge for the purpose of reviving the defunct quarterly meetings. At these meetings, a great feast was held and an annual meeting was also established to conduct the business of the lodges.

The oldest written document associated with Masonry is the Regius Manuscript dating to about 1340 A.D. It is considered one of the "Old Charges" or "Gothic Constitutions." From 1390 to 1850, there have been 113 versions of the Regius Manuscript identified. The purpose of the document was to serve as the rules and regulations for Masons. In early days, some lodges treated their copy like a charter, believing that the lodge could not meet without the copy of the Regius Manuscript being present. Some of the rules in the document included:

1. An apprentice must serve for seven years;
2. A Master Mason must be steadfast, trusty, and true;
3. Craftsmen must help one another by instructing those deficient in knowledge and skill;

4. A Master Mason must undertake no work that he cannot perform and finish; and

5. A Craftsman must love God, his church, his Master, and fellows.

The Regius Manuscript ends with these words: “Amen! Amen! So mote it be! So say we all for charity.” The phrase “so mote it be” can be translated as “so may it be.” Thus by saying “so mote it be” after lodge prayers today, Masons are continuing a custom more than 600 years old. In addition, it was obvious that charity was an important part of the early Masonic institutions as the guilds cared for its members’ families.

The oldest surviving lodge minutes that have been identified are from the Lodge of Edinburgh dated July 31, 1599. These minutes involve a lodge of Operative and not Speculative Masons. The minutes contained a reprimand to a member who employed a cowan. A cowan was defined as a craftsman who did not belong to a lodge. Thus, we derive our modern use of the word “cowan” as being one who is not entitled to enter and participate in our lodge proceedings.

The transition from Operative to Speculative Freemasonry was an essential component of the fraternity’s growth and influence. By the 1630s, non-Operative Masons were being admitted into Scottish lodges as honorary members. The first record of a non-Operative Mason in England occurred on May 20, 1641. Although records were very limited, there are records showing that in 1599 Freemasonry was a trade organization, and by 1717 it had evolved into a gentleman’s club that retained the structure and terminology of the trade groups which met as Operative Masons.

There are approximately 12,500 Masonic lodges in America, with a total membership of about 1,700,000.00 members. The first evidence of Masonry in America points to a meeting held at Tun Tavern in Philadelphia around 1730. The first written evidence of a lodge in America are minutes dated June 24, 1731, in Philadelphia. Those minutes mention that Benjamin Franklin had paid his dues five months previously, meaning that the fraternity had existed at least by December 1730.

In 1735, the Grand Lodge of England chartered Solomon’s Lodge in Charleston, South Carolina. That lodge still meets today and is the oldest continually meeting lodge in the United States. Charleston was also the birthplace of Scottish Rite in this country in 2001.

During the early development of Masonry in the United States, there were substantial questions as to whether or not a national Grand Lodge should be formed and whether all other lodges would be subordinate to the national Grand Lodge. This concept was debated and ultimately rejected in 1780, which led to the emergence of individual state Grand Lodges, which is the form of government now in existence in America.

The development of modern American Masonry was substantially affected by what came to be known as the Morgan Affair. In September 1826, an itinerant worker named

William Morgan announced that he was about to publish a book “exposing” the rituals of Freemasonry. There is substantial question as to whether Morgan was even a Mason, and most scholars believe that he was not.

Upon the announcement of his intent to publish an exposé, Morgan mysteriously was abducted and later was presumed to be murdered. Although not conclusive, evidence pointed to a group of renegade Masons who had committed this criminal act. The backlash against Masons was quick and dramatic and led to the closing of hundreds of lodges. In fact, a national political party by the name of the National Anti-Masonic Party became a viable political force for a number of years. It took at least 15 years for the anti-Masonic sentiment to wane.

As the fall-out from the Morgan affair diminished, lodges emerged as a much more serious-minded and sober organization. Meetings shifted from taverns to lodge halls and assumed many of the characteristics of present-day Masonic meetings.

The basic unit of Masonry is known as the “Blue Lodge.” Although various explanations have been given for this term, some believe that it is so named because of the blue trim on an officer’s apron. Others attribute the term to the symbolic covering of the lodge, which is the “blue” Heaven above.

An interesting development in Masonic history concerned the evolution of African-American Freemasonry. In 1775, fifteen Africa-Americans became Masons in Boston. Among them was a freed slave by the name of Prince Hall. In 1784, the Grand Lodge of England issued a charter to an American lodge of African-Americans, which included Prince Hall.

In 1827, believing that the Grand Lodge of England was ignoring them, the African-American lodges declared independence from the Grand Lodge of England and African-American Masonry became generally known as “Prince Hall Masonry.” This was an unfortunate development because it was a lack of communication between the Grand Lodge of England and the African-American Masons that led to such split.

In the early years, mainstream Grand Lodges did not recognize Prince Hall Masonry, but now over 40 state Grand Lodges recognize Prince Hall lodges.

In America, African-American lodges belong to one of two principal groups: (1) the National Compact Grand Lodge with 25 state Grand Lodges and (2) independent Grand Lodges in 42 states. Some states have one of each type of Grand Lodge.

The independent Grand Lodges in 42 states are much stronger than the National Compact Grand Lodge. At this time, neither group recognizes the other and neither considers the other’s members to be Masons.

Prince Hall Masonry has a full-range of appendent bodies, including Scottish Rite, York Rite, and Eastern Star.

When mainstream Grand Lodges in this country recognize Prince Hall Masonry, it is almost always a recognition of the independent Grand Lodge rather than the National Compact Grand Lodge.

Generally speaking, dues in Prince Hall lodges are significantly higher than in mainstream lodges, while the ritual work is reportedly very similar. Many Prince Hall lodges require a coat and tie or formal attire for their meetings. Generally speaking, Prince Hall lodges utilize many of the same symbols as mainstream lodges.

Today, modern-day customs and practices in our lodges have their roots in Operative Masonry. The utilization of the working tools and descriptions of the trestle board and attendant terms all owe themselves to Operative Masonry. However, Masonry has now evolved so that the truths of Masonry can only be obtained by studying the symbols of Masonry. It was the Speculative Masons that took the working tools of Operative Masons and developed them into a series of symbols by which man is able to obtain more light and thereby increase his spiritual knowledge and understanding of his relationship to God and his fellow man.

Thus, while Operative Masons formed the original framework for this great fraternal organization, the true importance of Masonry was developed by the Speculative Masons who sought to be an example of great moral, philosophical, and intellectual truths as revealed through the symbols of Masonry.