

APPROACHING THE PORTAL

of

Freemasonry

General Information Concerning Freemasonry

WHAT IS MASONRY?

Masonry is a unique institution that has been a major part of community life in America for over 250 years. Masonry, or more properly Freemasonry, is America's largest and oldest fraternity and one that continues to be an important part of many men's personal lives and growth.

Many years ago in England it was described as "a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols." It is a course of moral instruction using both allegories and symbols to teach its lessons. The legends and myths of the old stonemasons and Masons, many of them involved in building the great cathedrals of Europe, have been woven into an interesting and effective way to portray moral truths.

In Masonry, the old tools and ways of the Craftsmen are used to help dramatically portray those moral truths. Two examples are the 24-inch gauge and the common gavel. Just as the ruler is used to measure distance, the modern Mason uses it as a reminder to manage one of his most precious resources, time. And, as the gavel is used to shape stones, so it is also the symbol of the necessity for all of us to work to perfect ourselves.

One modern definition is: "Freemasonry is an organized society of men, symbolically applying the principles of Operative Masonry and architecture to the science and art of character building." In other words, Masonry uses ageless methods and lessons to make each of us a better person.

Thus, Masonry

- has a basic philosophy of life that places the individual worth of each man high on its pedestal and incorporates the great teachings of many ages to provide a way for individual study and thought,
- has great respect for religion and promotes toleration and equal esteem for the religious opinions of others,
- provides a real working plan for making good men even better,
- is a social organization,
- has many important charitable projects,
- has a rich worldwide history,
- can help to develop both public speaking and dramatic abilities and provides an effective avenue for developing leadership.

WHAT FREEMASONRY STANDS FOR

Freemasonry stands for some important principles and beliefs.

The primary doctrines of Freemasonry are Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. Its cardinal virtues are Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice. These principles or beliefs cover a broad field, actually supplying the pattern to meet every experience in human life.

In the United States, Freemasonry is a strong supporter of:

- constitutional government;
- quality public education;
- the freedom of religion and expression;
- the equality of all men and women;
- the need for strong moral character; and
- meaningful charity.

Masonry and the organizations that are within the Masonic family contribute over 700 million dollars every year to helping those with sight problems or aphasia, physically and developmentally disabled children, and those with severe burns. Local lodges work to help their communities and individuals within those communities. Masonry's charity is always given without regard to race, sex, creed or national origin.

WHO ARE MASONS?

Masons are men who have joined together to improve themselves. This is accomplished through the principles and ceremonies of the Fraternity. Members endeavor to extend Masonic lessons into their daily lives in order to become positive influences in their homes, communities, nation and throughout the world. They base their efforts on morality, justice, charity, truth and the laws of God. Worldwide, membership encompasses millions of men who believe and support the same fundamental principles.

THE MISSION OF FREEMASONRY

! The mission of Freemasonry is to promote a way of life that binds like-minded men in a worldwide Brotherhood that transcends all religious, ethnic, cultural, social and educational differences; by teaching the great principles of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth; and, by the outward expression of these, through its fellowship, its compassion and its concern, to find ways in which to serve God, family, country, neighbors and self.!

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF FREEMASONRY?

Simply put, the overall purpose of Masonry is to provide a way to help each member become a better person. The fraternity does not propose to take a bad man and make him good; rather, to take the good man and make him better. The fraternity places emphasis on the individual man by:

- strengthening his character;
- improving his moral and spiritual outlook; and
- broadening his mental horizons.

Freemasonry tries to impress upon its members the principles of personal responsibility and morality, to give each member an understanding of and feeling for Freemasonry's character, and to have every member put these lessons into practice in his daily life. The aim is to build a better world by building better men to work in their own communities.

Freemasonry believes in universal peace made possible by teaching its doctrine through the Brotherhood of Man and Fatherhood of God.

WHAT ARE LODGES?

The local Lodge is a group of Masons granted a Charter by the Grand Lodge of Vermont. There are specific guidelines set by the Grand Lodge as to how this local Lodge may function and what it can and cannot do. These guidelines are set forth in books of constitutions and ritual. The leaders of the Lodge are elected by the Lodge membership each year.

A Lodge is a meeting place for Masons. Masons may use it for regular business meetings, degrees, social activities, other Masonic groups or even community activities. Lodge buildings are prominently marked and are often recognized as special landmarks in the cities and towns of our state.

ORIGIN OF FREEMASONRY

It is not clear when the Craft was born. Hundreds of Masonic scholars have investigated this question, but no conclusive answer has been found and perhaps never will be. The earliest written record of the term "Master Mason" appears in the Regis Manuscript, written about 1390 and now kept in the British Museum. Its mention of the "Master Mason" refers to the stonemasons of the Middle Ages. The tools of the stonemason date back, of course, to the earliest periods of history and are lost in the mists of time. This is also true of the geometry and geometric symbols used in the craft of building.

Over the ages, Freemasonry slowly took form. It has evolved into a comprehensive and effective form of fraternal teaching of basic morals, truths and personal fulfillment. It ranks the individual's reasoning capabilities highly and encourages the questioning mind.

THE TWO TYPES OF MASONRY

There are actually two kinds of Masonry: Operative and Speculative.

Operative Masonry and its Lodges can be traced back to the early Middle Ages. Operative Masons formed groups with Lodges and Lodge officers. Men were admitted only after they had served a number of years as apprentices. This is the origin of the first or Entered Apprentice Degree. In Operative Masonry, Masons actually did the physical labor of building. They were the best at their Craft and they kept secret their methods of building.

When the organization became what is called Speculative Masonry, men were accepted into the Craft without being actual builders; that is, they were spiritual builders. Speculative Masonry adopts the terms and concepts of the actual builders, but substitutes men for stone and mortar, and works toward self-improvement rather than the actual construction of buildings.

ANCIENT FREE AND ACCEPTED MASONS

How did the words Ancient Free and Accepted originate?

The ancient Craftsmen were very skilled and their Craft was considered to be indispensable to the welfare of both church and state. They were the men who built castles and cathedrals. For this reason, they were not placed under the same restrictions as were other workers. They were free to do their work, travel and live their lives in a manner that was in line with their duties.

The Masons organized into guilds, something akin to a trade union, and individual companies or groups of Masons contracted for specific construction projects. In the England of that time, various Crafts (carpenters, distillers, pewterers, ironworkers, etc.) also organized into guilds, but most of the population worked under bond to the owners of the land on which they lived.

The word Accepted also goes back to the time of the Operative Mason. During the later years of the Middle Ages, there were few men educated outside the monasteries of the church. The accepted mason was originally a man who, in a Lodge operative in origin or still partly so in character, was, for all practical purposes of membership, accepted as a Mason. From this practice grew, in course of time, the use of the words Accepted and adopted to indicate a man who had been admitted into the inner fellowship of symbolic Masons. Candidates were accepted into Freemasonry no earlier than the mid-seventeenth century. The phrase free and accepted first appeared in 1722.

By the late 1600ís, the demand for the type of architecture that lent itself to the guild type of operation was declining. Architecture itself was changing; and the number of men, as well as the number of Operative Lodges, was declining. Increasingly, Masonry adopted the legends and habits of the old Operative Lodges for spiritual and moral purposes. As time went on, there became many more ìAcceptedî members than there were Operative members. Sometime in the eighteenth century, the ìAccepted Masonsî outnumbered the ìOperative Masonsî and Masonry gradually became exclusively a speculative organization rather than an operative one.

ORIGIN OF THE GRAND LODGE

In 1717, four Lodges in London met together and decided to form a Grand Lodge, possibly for no other reason than to strengthen and preserve them. In 1723, they adopted a Constitution. Their success led to establishment of still other Grand Lodges. In 1725, some of the Lodges in Ireland formed a Grand Lodge and a similar body was instituted in Scotland in 1736. Moreover, the Grand Lodge in England did not remain without rivals and at one time in the eighteenth century three Grand Lodges existed in England in addition to the one organized in 1717. Two of these died out without influencing the history of Masonry in general, but the third had a great part in the spread and popularizing of Masonry throughout the world. It called itself the ìAncientî Grand Lodge. The two surviving Grand Lodges were long and vigorous rivals, but they finally united in 1813 into the present United Grand Lodge of England. Thus, from one of these two Grand Bodies in England, or from those of Ireland or Scotland, all other Grand Lodges in the world today are descended.

Masonry was established in France sometime between 1718 and 1725. The first Lodge in Spain was established in 1728. A Lodge was established in Calcutta in 1728, Prague in 1729, and in Naples in 1731. Masonry was established in Poland in 1734 and Sweden in 1735.

The growth of Freemasonry and its ideals and beliefs were not without opposition. Masons are taught that all men are created equal and meet upon the level. Individual freedom of thought and action, as well as morality and ethics, are the concepts and ideals upon which Masonry is founded. The teachings are a condemnation of autocratic governments which, in turn, condemn Freemasonry.

MASONIC HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES AND VERMONT

It was inevitable that Freemasonry should follow the colonists to America and play a most important role in the establishment of the thirteen colonies. Freemasonry was formally recognized for the first time in America with the appointment by the Grand Lodge of England of a Provincial Grand Master in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania in 1730. American Masons worked under foreign jurisdiction until 1731, when the first American Grand Lodge was established in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Some of the earliest Grand Lodges in America received their charters from the Premier Grand Lodge of England with warrants authorizing them to issue Charters for other states.

One of the most romantic portions of all Masonic history lies in the story of the part played by Freemasons in the formation of our country. Without exaggeration, Freemasonry and Masonic thinking contributed most significantly to founding of this great republic. Many of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, as well as the drafters of the Constitution, were members of the Fraternity. George Washington was a staunch Freemason. He was the first of fourteen Masonic Presidents, and the only one to serve as Worshipful Master of a Lodge and President at one and the same time. The other Masonic Presidents were Monroe, Jackson, Polk, Buchanan, Johnson, Garfield, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Taft, Harding, Franklin Roosevelt, Truman and Ford, of whom Truman and Jackson served also as Grand Masters.

In the struggle for independence, many well known patriots such as Paul Revere, Benjamin Franklin, John Hancock, the Marquis de Lafayette and Baron Von Steuben were members of the Craft. No doubt Freemasonry was responsible for and shared much of their thinking and opinions. Much has been written about the participation of the Fraternity in the Revolution and founding of America and it is an episode of which Masons are proud. Ever since that period, Freemasonry has grown and flourished, following closely the growth and expansion of the United States.

Titles of Grand Lodges in the United States vary in the same manner as in other parts of the world. Some Grand Lodges are called A.F. & A.M., meaning Ancient Free and Accepted Masons as used in Colorado and 23 other states, or F. & A.M., Free and Accepted Masons, as used in Vermont and jurisdictions of the remaining 25 states.

The Grand Lodge of Vermont originated in an interesting and rather unique manner. Representatives from the earliest Lodges to be chartered in Vermont convened at Manchester in October 1794 with a specific goal of writing a "Constitution for a Grand Lodge." Such a document was completed and, on October 14th of that year, it was approved and formally adopted by delegates from the five Lodges first organized in the state, namely Vermont, North Star, Dorchester, Temple and Union Lodges. Brother Noah Smith of Temple Lodge was elected first Grand Master of the "Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons for Vermont."

WHAT MASONRY IS NOT

It is not a secret society!

A secret society is generally one that wraps itself in a cloak of absolute secrecy. That means no one knows who the members are, where they meet, what they do or what they stand for.

That is not Masonry at all! Masonry may have "secrets," but it is not a secret society. Masonic secrets are few in number and deal with the general method of initiation, the ways members recognize each other and very little else. These parts of the ritual, which are called the esoteric side of Masonry, have been handed down by word of mouth for centuries. Masonry's purposes, ideals and principles may be learned by

anyone who inquires. There are numerous books on these subjects, which are available to the public. Masonry often has public notices in the newspapers and members are usually numbered among the more prominent citizens in the community.

It is not a religion!

Masonry, as an organization, is understanding and tolerant of all religious thoughts. Masonry has no specific creed, no dogma and no priesthood. There are no requirements as to religious preference in becoming a Mason. Nonsectarian prayers are a common part of all our ceremonies, but are not offered to a specific deity.

Masonic ritual does incorporate lessons and examples from the Bible, but they are given as representative illustrations.

Masonry does not require you to belong to a church, synagogue or mosque although many Masons are very active in their religious organizations, and among our numbers are leaders of many denominations. Freemasonry accepts your right to belong to any church or religious organization of your choice and does not infringe on that right. Neither does Masonry try to be a substitute for your church. Masonry wants to unite men for the purpose of Brotherhood, not as an organized religion.

WHAT MASONRY DOES NOT DO

Sectarian religion and partisan politics are not discussed in Lodge and there are very good reasons why. When members meet in a Lodge, they are all on a level and are not subject to the classes and distinctions of the outside world. Each Brother is entitled to his own beliefs and may follow his own convictions. The objective is to unite men, not to divide them. These two subjects can cause honest differences of opinion that might well cause friction among Brothers. No member running for political office has any right to expect the support of any other member because of Lodge affiliation. This does not mean, however, that matters which concern them with the nature of government or individual freedoms are not proper concerns of Masons as good citizens.

There will be subjects concerning the Lodge's business that have to be discussed. These discussions should be kept within the bounds of propriety and everyone should show tolerance for the opinion of the other. Every Master wants harmony in his Lodge; and, once a matter has been put to a vote in the Lodge and a decision made, the decision should be accepted by all members regardless of how they voted.

Masonry teaches every Mason to be a good citizen and to perform his civic duties. Masonry does not try to keep anyone from expressing his opinion, or from serving his city, county, state or nation in an honorable manner. Anyone who serves in political office should not act politically as a Freemason; nor should he act in the name of Freemasonry in exercising his rights.

To sum up, Masons never introduce into the Craft any controversial sectarian or political question. They pay no heed to those, from without, who attack the Fraternity, and are ever loyal to the demands of good citizenship.

QUALIFICATIONS OF A PETITIONER

Our Grand Lodge has decreed that a petitioner for the Degrees of Masonry must be a free man in the fullest sense, at least 18 years of age, able bodied, of good moral character and a believer in a Supreme Being. He must be a peaceable citizen, loyal to his country and its laws. It further decrees that no one who belongs to any organization subversive to the government of the United States or the State of Vermont is eligible for membership.

In addition, it is generally understood that there are internal and external qualifications necessary to become a Mason. The internal qualifications refer to those not apparent to the world outside of the Fraternity and include the petitioner's attitude toward the Fraternity and his motives and designs in seeking entrance to it.

The outward qualifications refer to the physical fitness to participate in the Degrees and perform the duties of a member, his reputation in the community and his financial ability to conform to the requirements of membership. The applicant must act of his own free will; he must first be prepared in his heart and must act uninfluenced by friends and unbiased by mercenary motives.

The petitioner must have been a resident within Vermont during the last six months preceding the date of the petition, except in cases of men serving in the Armed Forces. He must personally sign the petition in his own handwriting. Three members of the Fraternity, each of whom must be members of the Lodge to which he is petitioning, must sign his petition.

MASONIC ORGANIZATIONS

The first Masonic organization a person petitions is a Masonic Lodge (also referred to as a "Blue Lodge", "subordinate lodge" or "symbolic lodge"). It is the basis of all other organizations requiring Masonic affiliation, one or more of which you, or a member of your family, may want to join sometime in the future.

It is not clear where the name "Blue Lodge" originated. One theory is that blue is generally regarded as the color to characterize friendship. Colors have a large place in the traditions of the Craft. Today it is generally agreed that the American usage is derived from English Freemasonry. The United Grand Lodge of England, in choosing the colors of its regalia, was guided mainly by the colors associated with the Noble Orders of the Star and Garter and the Bath. When the Most Noble Order of the Garter was instituted by Edward III in 1348, its color was light blue. Worldwide, in many cultures, blue symbolizes immortality, eternity, fidelity, prudence and goodness. In Freemasonry in particular, blue is symbolic of universal Brotherhood and friendship and "instructs us that in the mind of a Mason, those virtues should be as extensive as

the blue arch of Heaven itself.†

Concordant Bodies

Two of the organizations that require their members to be "Blue Lodge" Masons, the York Rite and the Scottish Rite, expand on the teachings of the Blue Lodge, or basic Masonry, and further explain its meaning. In each, the lessons are in the form of degrees often called the "higher Degrees" of Masonry although there is, in truth, no higher Degree than that of Master Mason.

Appendant Bodies

The Ancient Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine, commonly called the Shrine, is not formally connected with Masonry, and its previous restriction to members of the York Rite or Scottish Rite has been dropped. The organization is socially oriented and has as its major project the funding and operation of nearly two dozen hospitals for physically handicapped and burned children. In addition, the Mystic Order of Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm (Grotto) and Tall Cedars of Lebanon are also socially oriented organizations that have their own charities which they support.

Research Lodges do academic study on Masonry. There is currently one Research Lodge in Vermont and membership is open to any Master mason.

The Order of the Eastern Star, White Shrine of Jerusalem and the Amaranth admit both men and women. Masonry also offers three organizations for youths: the International Order of DeMolay for boys, the International Order of Job's Daughters and International Order of Rainbow for girls.

Many other Concordant and Appendant bodies will welcome you and your family as members once you become a Master mason. All you will need is the time and energy to participate.

YOUR DUTIES SHOULD YOU BECOME A MASON

Should you decide to join Freemasonry, you will become a member of the Fraternity when you have received the three Degrees and have signed and received a copy of your Lodge By-laws. Your duties will always include loyalty to Masonry, faithfulness to your superior officers, and obedience to Masonic laws. These are fundamental conditions of membership.

As a Mason, it will be your duty to hold membership in a Lodge. If necessary you may transfer your membership to another Lodge. In Vermont, "dual" membership is limited to no more than two Lodges. Membership in a Lodge necessitates some monetary obligation. Dues should be paid promptly as an imperative condition of that membership. While the Lodge is not an organized charity, it teaches love and charity for all mankind and especially for Brother Masons, their widows and orphans. It will,

therefore, be your duty to stand ready to lend a helping hand to a Brother Mason in sickness or distress and to take part in supporting the charities of your Lodge so far as your conscience will guide you and your means permit.

As a Master Mason, when you are present at your Lodge you must vote when a ballot is taken on an application for membership. Voting on prospective members is not a right or privilege to be exercised at your discretion, but an obligation and a duty. This is another way of saying that the responsibility for deciding who shall be Masons rests on every Mason.

You may be summoned by the Worshipful Master to attend a meeting of your Lodge for some special purpose, or to discharge some duty required of you as a Mason; unless circumstances at the time make it impossible, it will be your duty to obey. A Lodge differs from any other organization in many fundamental respects. Duties and obligations may not be laid down or taken up at pleasure, and membership is not a mere gesture of honor or an idle privilege. A member may not stand aside until an opportunity occurs to secure something from it for his own selfish purpose, nor may he evade his responsibilities by shifting his burdens to more willing shoulders. The Mystic tie that binds him to his fellows holds him fast.

When among strangers, you will have certain means of recognition. Committing to memory the modes of recognition, the requirements of your Obligations, and the possession of a valid dues card will provide the necessary means of proving yourself to be a Mason when visiting Lodges in this as well as other jurisdictions. Knowing that wherever you go in the world you will find Brothers ready to extend to you the hand of fellowship, whatever your financial or social position, is one of the greatest of all privileges of membership.

YOUR REWARDS AS A MASON

If you go through the Degrees, receive the work, decide that Freemasonry is a fine Institution and do nothing about the teachings presented to you, then you are wasting our time as well as your own time and money. If you recognize the opportunity which is yours, take the various doctrines and truths presented to you, study them, analyze them, contemplate their meanings and apply them to your own life, then your investment of time and money will be richly rewarded.

Do not adopt a double standard of conduct, whereby you apply Freemasonry to a part of your life, but feel that it doesn't apply to other phases. The thoughtful Freemason will apply the teachings of the masonic institution to each and every phase of his life and we sincerely hope that you will see fit to follow such a practice. This great opportunity for self-improvement is one that you should grasp to such an extent that the principles of Freemasonry will eventually spread through every facet of your life. When they do, you will have allowed Freemasonry to become one of the greatest of your personal experiences.

As a member of a Lodge, you will be eligible for any office in it. It will be your right to

visit other Lodges in this or other Grand Jurisdictions, provided always that the Worshipful Master is willing to admit you after you have been properly identified. In case of sickness or distress, you also have the right to apply for relief.

THE PROFICIENCY

Proficiency is evidence that the candidate is qualified for advancement, just as in the days of Operative Masonry, when the worker had to show that he was qualified to do more complicated tasks. Your Lodge will be responsible for administering any and all proficiency requirements as well as for establishing the standards of acceptance, including the process and methods by which those requirements and standards are to be met.

In Vermont, candidates are asked to stand an examination in the catechism of each Degree. They must also learn the modes of recognition for all three Degrees. Booklets and manuals are presented as a gift to each candidate at the conclusion of the Degree ceremonies, and a Mentor is assigned to assist with attaining proficiency. The Mentor helps the candidate learn the material, answers any questions that may arise and sees that the candidate passes smoothly through the process of becoming an informed Mason and an active Lodge member.

The Mentor can also provide helpful supplemental lecture booklets, other study materials, and directions to other sources of Masonic information. These materials will further enhance his Masonic education and knowledge of the symbolism and ritualistic work.

When you pass the proficiency requirements of the Lodge, you will be eligible to make application for any concordant or appendant body of your choosing. In addition, you will be eligible to assume one of the officer's stations to progress through the line of your Lodge with the goal of becoming Worshipful Master. This is an extremely rewarding endeavor for those who pursue such a goal.

Attendance in your Lodge is strongly encouraged. When you become comfortable and at ease there, join some of your Lodge Brothers in visiting other Lodges in Vermont. You become eligible as well, during future travels, to visit Lodges in jurisdictions beyond the State of Vermont or United States borders, if you request and receive visitation privileges or are invited to attend. The broader your attendance at home and at other Lodges, the greater will be your rewards and enjoyment from the brotherhood and camaraderie that are outstanding hallmarks of Freemasonry. As in all endeavors, you will receive as much from your Masonic experiences as you put into them.

SEEKING FURTHER INFORMATION

The decision to enter the ranks of Freemasonry is your own without the undue influence of others. That makes your membership in Masonry one of your own choice, which is significant. Men join Masonry for a variety of reasons, each valid

and important.

As you consider the information presented here, we encourage you to browse the other pages on the Grand Lodge Web Site (www.vtfreemasons.org). It can provide further information on our fraternity and the many interesting things that are taking place in Masonry throughout our state.

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ⁱ This web page is a revision of the introduction in the booklet "Approaching the Portal of Freemasonry" which is presented to men joining Masonry during the Vermont Grand Master's One Day Class. It would literally take volumes to begin to explain the significance of each and every event within Masonic Degrees and ceremonies. Thousands of books and tens of thousands of articles have been written about all aspects of Freemasonry. Only through diligent study can you begin to fully realize and comprehend the magnificence, as well as the significance, of the ancient ritual and the symbolism contained in each degree. You are, therefore, earnestly and sincerely encouraged to continue to investigate all of the various aspects of our Beloved Ancient Craft.

The entire booklet is an adaptation of a similar booklet produced by the Masonic Renewal Committee of North America which the Grand Jurisdiction of Maryland modified for use by members of its "One Day Class". The Grand Lodge of Vermont most gratefully acknowledge the Grand Lodge of Maryland for consenting to its use, with appropriate further modifications contained herein, by the Grand Lodge of Vermont for the Grand Master's Accelerated Degree Class.