

Freemasonry

Freemasonry or **Masonry** consists of fraternal organizations that trace their origins to the local fraternities of stonemasons that from the end of the 14th century regulated the qualifications of stonemasons and their interaction with authorities and clients. The Square and Compasses are among the traditional tools of stonemasons. With the decline of cathedral building, some lodges of operative (working) masons began to accept honorary members to bolster their declining membership. From a few of these lodges developed modern symbolic or speculative Freemasonry, which particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries adopted the rites and trappings of ancient religious orders and of chivalric brotherhoods. Freemasonry has been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories throughout the years. Freemasonry is not a Christian institution, though it has often been mistaken for such. Freemasonry contains many of the elements of a religion; its teachings enjoin morality, charity, and obedience to the law of the land. Modern Freemasonry broadly consists of two main recognition groups:

- Regular Freemasonry insists that a volume of scripture be open in a working lodge, that every member profess belief in a Supreme Being, that no women be admitted, and that the discussion of religion and politics be banned.
- Continental Freemasonry is now the general term for the jurisdictions that have removed some, or all, of these restrictions.

So, what is Freemasonry? Simply put, it's the world's oldest and largest fraternity. Its membership is a Who's Who of world history -- George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Winston Churchill, Mozart, Davy Crockett, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Houdini, Gerald Ford, Henry Ford, John Wayne, even Colonel Sanders. The Masons are philanthropic. They reportedly donate \$2 million to charity every day.

If you want to be a Mason, you can petition a local lodge for membership. You'll need to demonstrate good character and belief in some sort of Supreme Being. Oh, and in almost all lodges, it's men only. The basic, local organizational unit of Freemasonry is the Lodge. These private Lodges are usually supervised at the regional level (usually having the same boundary with either a state, province, or national border) by a Grand Lodge or Grand Orient. There is no international, worldwide Grand Lodge that supervises all of Freemasonry; each Grand Lodge is independent, and they do not necessarily recognize each other as being legitimate.

The degrees of Freemasonry retain the three grades of medieval craft guilds, those of Apprentice, Journeyman or fellow (now called Fellowcraft), and Master Mason. The candidate of these three degrees is progressively taught the meanings of the symbols of Freemasonry and entrusted with grips, signs and words to signify to other members that he has been so initiated. The degrees are part allegorical morality play and part lecture. Three degrees are offered by Craft (or Blue Lodge) Freemasonry, and members of any of these degrees are known as **Freemasons** or **Masons**. There are additional degrees, which vary with locality and jurisdiction, and are usually administered by their own bodies (separate from those who administer the Craft degrees).

Masonic lodge

The Masonic lodge is the basic organizational unit of Freemasonry. The Lodge meets regularly and conducts the usual formal business of any small organization (approve minutes, elect new members, appoint officers and take their reports, consider correspondence, bills and annual accounts, organize social and charitable events, etc.). In addition to such business, the meeting may perform a ceremony to confer a Masonic degree^[3] or receive a lecture, which is usually on some aspect of Masonic history or ritual. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Lodge may hold a formal dinner, or *festive board*, sometimes involving toasting and song.

The bulk of Masonic ritual consists of degree ceremonies conferred in meetings guarded by a "Tyler" outside the door with a drawn sword to keep out unqualified intruders to Masonry. (This officer, the Tyler, is necessarily senior because at the door he may hear the highest degree ceremonies, and often a less affluent elderly Mason is offered the office to relieve his need for Masonic company, refreshments and/or fees, without having to pay a subscription.

Candidates for Freemasonry are progressively *initiated* into Freemasonry,

- First in the degree of **Entered Apprentice**.
- At some later time, in separate ceremonies, they will be *passed* to the degree of **Fellowcraft**;
- The last or highest degree is a **Master Mason**.

In each of these ceremonies, the candidate must first take the new obligations of the degree, and is then entrusted with secret knowledge including passwords, signs and grips (secret handshakes) confined to his new rank.

Another ceremony is the annual installation of the Master of the Lodge and his appointed or elected officers. In some jurisdictions an *Installed Master* elected, obligated and invested to preside over a Lodge, is valued as a separate rank with its own secrets and distinctive title and attributes; after each full year in the Chair the Master invests his elected successor and becomes a Past Master with privileges in the Lodge and Grand Lodge. In other jurisdictions, the grade is not recognized, and no inner ceremony conveys new secrets during the installation of a new Master of the Lodge.

Most Lodges have some sort of social functions, allowing members, their partners and non-Masonic guests to meet openly. Often coupled with these events is the discharge of every Mason's and Lodge's collective obligation to contribute to charity. This occurs at many levels, including in annual dues, subscriptions, fundraising events, Lodges and Grand Lodges. Masons and their charities contribute for the relief of need in many fields, such as education, health and old age.

Almost all officers of a Lodge are elected or appointed annually. Every Masonic Lodge has a Master, two Wardens, a treasurer and a secretary. There is also always a Tyler, or outer guard, outside the door of a working Lodge, who may be paid to secure its privacy. Other offices vary between jurisdictions.

Each Masonic Lodge exists and operates according to ancient principles known as the *Landmarks of Freemasonry*, which elude any universally accepted definition.

Joining a lodge

Candidates for Freemasonry will usually have met the most active members of the Lodge they are joining before being elected for initiation. The process varies among Grand Lodges, but in modern times interested people often look up a local Lodge through the Internet and will typically be introduced to a Lodge social function or open evening. The onus is upon candidates to ask to join; while they may be encouraged to ask, they may not be invited. Once the initial inquiry is made, a formal application may be proposed and seconded or announced in open Lodge and a more or less formal interview usually follows. If the candidate wishes to proceed, references are taken up during a period of notice so that members may enquire into the candidate's suitability and discuss it. Finally, the Lodge takes an officially secret ballot on each application before a candidate is either initiated or rejected. In UGLE any single member's adverse vote, a "blackball" given secretly without stating a reason, or at most two, will suffice to reject a candidate (whereupon their proposer and seconder would be expected to resign from the Lodge).

A minimum requirement of every body of Freemasons is that each candidate must be "free and of good repute".

The question of freedom, a standard feudal requirement of mediaeval guilds, is nowadays one of independence: the object is that every Mason should be a proper and responsible person. Thus, each Grand Lodge has a standard minimum age, varying greatly and often subject to dispensation in particular cases. (For example, the Apollo University Lodge at Oxford has always had dispensations to initiate undergraduates below 21, the former English legal age of majority and still the standard UGLE minimum: in the twenty-first century, all university lodges now share this privilege).

Additionally, most Grand Lodges require a candidate to declare a belief in a Supreme Being, (although every candidate must interpret this condition in his own way, as all religious discussion is commonly prohibited). In a few cases, the candidate may be required to be of a specific religion.

The form of Freemasonry most common in Scandinavia (known as the Swedish Rite), for example, accepts only Christians. At the other end of the spectrum, "Liberal" or Continental Freemasonry, exemplified by the Grand Orient de France, does not require a declaration of belief in any deity and accepts atheists (the cause of the distinction from the rest of Freemasonry).

During the ceremony of initiation, the candidate is required to undertake an obligation, swearing on the religious volume sacred to his personal faith to do good as a Mason. In the course of three degrees, Masons will promise to keep the secrets of their degree from lower degrees and outsiders, as far as practicality and the law permit, and to support a fellow Mason in distress.

There is formal instruction as to the duties of a Freemason, but on the whole, Freemasons are left to explore the craft in the manner they find most satisfying. Some will simply enjoy the dramatics, or the management and administration of the lodge, others will explore the history, ritual and symbolism of the craft, others will focus their involvement on their Lodge's social side, perhaps in association with other lodges, while still others will concentrate on the lodge's charitable functions.

Organization

Grand Lodges

Grand Lodges and Grand Orients are independent and sovereign bodies that govern Masonry in a given country, state or geographical area (termed a *jurisdiction*). There is no single overarching governing body that presides over worldwide Freemasonry; connections between different jurisdictions depend solely on mutual recognition.

Freemasonry, as it exists in various forms all over the world, has a membership estimated by the United Grand Lodge of England at around 6 million worldwide. The fraternity is administratively organized into independent Grand Lodges (or sometimes Grand Orients), each of which governs its own Masonic jurisdiction, which consists of subordinate (or *constituent*) Lodges.

- The largest single jurisdiction, in terms of membership, is the United Grand Lodge of England (with a membership estimated at around a quarter million).
- The Grand Lodge of Scotland and Grand Lodge of Ireland (taken together) have approximately 150,000 members.
- In the United States, total membership is just under 2 million.

Regularity is a concept based on adherence to Masonic Landmarks, the basic membership requirements, tenets and rituals of the craft. The most commonly shared rules for Recognition (based on Regularity) are those given by the United Grand Lodge of England in 1929:

- The Grand Lodge should be established by an existing regular Grand Lodge, or by at least three regular Lodges.
- A belief in a supreme being and scripture is a condition of membership.
- Initiates should take their vows on that scripture.
- Only men can be admitted, and no relationship exists with mixed Lodges.
- The Grand Lodge has complete control over the first three degrees, and is not subject to another body.
- All Lodges shall display a volume of scripture with the square and compasses while in session.
- There is no discussion of politics or religion.
- "Antient landmarks, customs and usages" observed.^[1]

Other degrees, orders, and bodies

The Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite is a system of 33 degrees, including the three Blue Lodge degrees administered by a local or national Supreme Council. This system is popular in North America, South America and in Continental Europe. In America, the York Rite, with a similar range, administers three orders of Masonry, namely the Royal Arch, Cryptic Masonry, and Knights Templar.

Ritual and symbolism

Freemasonry describes itself as a "beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols". The symbolism is mainly, but not exclusively, drawn from the tools of stonemasons – the square and compasses, the level and plumb rule, the trowel, the rough and smooth ashlar, among others. Moral lessons are attributed to each of these tools, although the assignment is by no means consistent. The meaning of the symbolism is taught and explored through ritual, and in lectures and articles by individual Masons who offer their personal insights and opinions.

All Freemasons begin their journey in the "craft" by being progressively "initiated", "passed" and "raised" into the three degrees of Craft, or Blue Lodge Masonry. During these three rituals, the candidate is

progressively taught the Masonic symbols, and entrusted with grips or tokens, signs and words to signify to other Masons which degrees he has taken. The dramatic allegorical ceremonies include explanatory lectures, and revolve around the construction of the Temple of Solomon, and the artistry and death of the chief architect, Hiram Abiff. The degrees are those of "Entered apprentice", "Fellowcraft" and "Master Mason". ***While many different versions of these rituals exist, with various lodge layouts and versions of the Hiram legend, each version is recognizable to any Freemason from any jurisdiction.***

In some jurisdictions, the main themes of each degree are illustrated by tracing boards. These painted depictions of Masonic themes are exhibited in the lodge according to which degree is being worked, and are explained to the candidate to illustrate the legend and symbolism of each degree.

The idea of Masonic brotherhood probably descends from a 16th-century legal definition of a "brother" as one who has taken an oath of mutual support to another. Accordingly, Masons swear at each degree to keep the contents of that degree secret, and to support and protect their brethren unless they have broken the law. In most Lodges the oath or obligation is taken on a *Volume of Sacred Law*, whichever book of divine revelation is appropriate to the religious beliefs of the individual brother (usually the Bible in the Anglo-American tradition).

History

Thomas De Quincey in his work titled *Rosicrucians and Freemasonry* put forward the theory that suggested that Freemasonry may have been an outgrowth of Rosicrucianism (*a spiritual and cultural movement that arose in Europe in the early 17th century after the publication of several texts that purported to announce the existence of a hitherto unknown esoteric [it is known, understood, or appreciated by only a small number of people] order to the world and made seeking its knowledge attractive to many*). The manifestos do not elaborate extensively on the matter, but clearly combine references to Kabbalah, Hermeticism, alchemy, and Christian mysticism. The theory had also been postulated in 1803 by German professor; J. G. Buhle. The Rosicrucian manifestos heralded a "universal reformation of mankind", through a science allegedly kept secret for decades until the intellectual climate might receive it. Controversies arose on whether they were a hoax, whether the "Order of the Rosy Cross" existed as described in the manifestos, and whether the whole thing was a metaphor disguising a movement that really existed, but in a different form. ***By promising a spiritual transformation at a time of great turmoil, the manifestos influenced many figures to seek esoteric knowledge.***

Rosicrucian manifestos

Between 1614 and 1617, three anonymous manifestos were published, first in Germany and later throughout Europe. These were the:

- *Fama Fraternitatis RC* (*The Fame of the Brotherhood of RC*, 1614)
- *The Confessio Fraternitatis* (*The Confession of the Brotherhood of RC*, 1615)
- *Chymical Wedding of Christian Rosicross anno 1459*, 1617)

The *Fama Fraternitatis* presents the legend of a German doctor and mystic philosopher referred to as "Father Brother C.R.C." (later identified in a third manifesto as Christian Rosenkreuz, or "Rose-cross"). The year 1378 is presented as being the birth year of "our Christian Father", and it is stated that he lived 106 years. After studying in the Middle East under various masters, possibly adhering to Sufism, he was unable to spread the knowledge he had acquired to prominent European scientists and philosophers. Instead, he gathered a small circle of friends/disciples and founded the Rosicrucian Order (this can be deduced to have occurred around 1407).

During Rosenkreuz's lifetime, the order was said to comprise no more than eight members, each a doctor and a sworn bachelor. Each member undertook an oath to heal the sick without accepting payment, to maintain a secret fellowship, and to find a replacement for himself before he died. **Three such generations had supposedly passed between c. 1500 and c. 1600: a time when scientific, philosophical, and religious freedom had grown so that the public might benefit from the Rosicrucians' knowledge, so that they were now seeking good men.**

The manifestos were, and continue to be, not taken literally by many but rather regarded either as hoaxes or as allegorical statements. They state: "We speak unto you by parables, but would willingly bring you to the right, simple, easy, and ingenuous exposition, understanding, declaration, and knowledge of all secrets.

In the early 17th century, the manifestos caused excitement throughout Europe by declaring the existence of a secret brotherhood of alchemists and sages who were preparing to transform the arts and sciences, and religious, political, and intellectual landscapes of Europe. Wars of politics and religion ravaged the continent. The works were re-issued several times, followed by numerous pamphlets, favorable or otherwise. Between 1614 and 1620, about 400 manuscripts and books were published which discussed the Rosicrucian documents.

North America

The earliest known American lodges were in Pennsylvania. The Collector for the port of Pennsylvania, John Moore, wrote of attending lodges there in 1715, two years before the putative formation of the first Grand Lodge in London. The Premier Grand Lodge of England appointed a Provincial Grand Master for North America in 1731, based in Pennsylvania, leading to the creation of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania.

In Canada, Erasmus James Philipps became a Freemason while working on a commission to resolve boundaries in New England and, in 1739, he became provincial Grand Master for Nova Scotia; Philipps founded the first Masonic lodge in Canada at Annapolis Royal, Nova Scotia.

Other lodges in the colony of Pennsylvania obtained authorizations from the later Antient Grand Lodge of England, the Grand Lodge of Scotland, and the Grand Lodge of Ireland, which was particularly well represented in the travelling lodges of the British Army. Many lodges came into existence with no warrant from any Grand Lodge, applying and paying for their authorization only after they were confident of their own survival.

Religious opposition

Freemasonry has attracted criticism from theocratic states and organized religions for supposed competition with religion, or supposed heterodoxy (*any opinions or doctrines at variance with an official or orthodox position*) within the fraternity itself and has long been the target of conspiracy theories, which assert Freemasonry to be an occult and evil power.

Many religions have spoken out against Freemasonry as they felt it dealt with the occult and even satanic powers. These religions over the decades and centuries have attempted to declare the exact opposition but have fallen short as the Freemasonry order has most of its beliefs and practices shrouded in secrecy. Only innuendo and guess work has been used to condemn the order.

Political opposition

Conspiracy theorists have long associated Freemasonry with the New World Order and the Illuminati, and state that Freemasonry as an organization is either bent on world domination or already secretly in control of world politics. Historically Freemasonry has attracted criticism, and suppression from both the politically far right.

In some countries anti-Masonry is often related to antisemitism and anti-Zionism. For example, in 1980, the Iraqi legal and penal code was changed by Saddam Hussein's ruling Ba'ath Party, making it a felony to "promote or acclaim Zionist principles, including Freemasonry, or who associate [themselves] with Zionist organizations". Professor Andrew Prescott of the University of Sheffield writes: "Since at least the time of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, antisemitism has gone hand in hand with anti-masonry, so it is not surprising that allegations that 11 September was a Zionist plot have been accompanied by suggestions that the attacks were inspired by a masonic world order".

Modern times

Freemasonry remains most popular in the British Isles and in other countries originally within the empire. Estimates of the worldwide membership of Freemasonry in the early 21st century ranged from about two million to more than six million. Today, Freemasonry has about 1.3 million members in the U.S., down from 4 million in 1959. Among the members today: African-Americans, formerly relegated to a separate, black-only branch of Freemasonry.