

Moderns and Antients

Unknown

The history of early organized Freemasonry is scanty, sketchy, much of it shrouded in mystery. Historians without number have guessed much and their suppositions, after a long period of discussion of what might be called "trial and error", finally coalesced into a fairly coherent story. This began as a "might have been" and finally became a "must have been" tale.

But the modern Masonic chronicler, in the face of different conclusions from such stalwarts as Gould, Mackey, Hughan and company, is perfectly willing to admit the gaps in sources and to emphasize our uncertainties as to many of the facts.

The first Grand Lodge was formed in 1717. The first account of it was published in "Anderson's Constitutions" six years later. Not until 1738 – twenty-one years later, with the second edition of Anderson – did the Masonic world possess the following minutes:

"After the Rebellion was over, A.D. 1716, the few Lodges at London... thought fit to cement under a Grand Master as the center of Union Harmony, viz., the Lodges that met,

1. At the Goose and Gridiron Ale- house in St. Paul's Churchyard.
2. At the Crown Ale - house in Parker's-Lane, near Drury-Lane.
3. At the Apple-Tree Tavern in Charles Street, Covent-Garden.
4. At the Rummer and Grapes Tavern in Channel-Row, Westminster.

"They and some old Brothers met at the said Apple-Tree, and having put into the Chair the oldest Master Mason (now the Master of a Lodge), they constituted themselves a Grand Lodge pro Tempore in Due Form, and forthwith revived the Quarterly Communication of the Officers of Lodges (called the Grand Lodge), resolv'd to hold the Annual Assembly and Feast, and then chuse a GRAND MASTER from among themselves, till they should have the Honour of a Noble Brother at their Head.

Accordingly

On St. John Baptist's Day, in the 3d Year of King George I, A.D. 1717, the ASSEMBLY and Feast of the Free and Accepted Masons was held at the aforesaid Goose and Gridiron Ale-house.

"Before Dinner, the oldest Master Mason (now the Master of a Lodge) in the Chair, proposed a List of proper Candidates; and the Brethren by a Majority of Hands elected Mr. Anthony Sayer, Gentleman, Grand Master of Masons, – Capt. Joseph Elliot, Mr. Jacob Lamball, Carpenter, Grand Wardens – who being forthwith invested with the Badges of Office and power by the said oldest Master, and installed, was duly congratulated by the Assembly who paid him the Homage."

How many lodges were in London in 1717? We do not know. Were any others asked to join with the original four in formation of the first Grand Lodge? We do not know. And we do not know too much even of the four.

According to the "Engraved List of Lodges", dated 1729, the lodge which met at the Goose and Gridiron was constituted – by whom or what, unknown – in 1691. It moved from tavern to tavern, it changed its name, it became the Lodge of Antiquity, but not until 1774 when William Preston became its Master did it become really important.

The second of the four old lodges, meeting at the Crown Tavern, died out in 1736 and disappeared from "The Engraved List" in 1740.

The third lodge, which met in the Appletree Tavern, gave Anthony Sayer to the first Grand Lodge as its first Grand Master. It seems to have done much moving about, both as to meeting place and name and even number. It finally became the Lodge of Fortitude (1768) and after the Union (1813) in 1818 it united with Cumberland Lodge and became the Fortitude and Old Cumberland Lodge No. 12.

The fourth lodge was, apparently, composed almost wholly of speculative Masons, while the other three were still largely of a membership of the operative or workmen class. It had a membership of at least seventy and many of these were of England's nobility and high social distinction. This, "The Old Horn Lodge", was probably preeminent in the first Grand Lodge in its formative period .

It is extremely difficult to avoid reading today's ideas and practices into yesterday's happenings, when those events are so sketchily supported by documentary evidence. Any American Grand Lodge today is a body which thoroughly understands its purpose, its beginnings, its powers, its duties. The first Grand Lodge merely groped its way in Masonic darkness towards a new conception of Freemasonry. That it builded so well is our good fortune. That it had such a difficult time in doing it is perhaps understandable.

The passage of years has greatly smoothed out the mistakes which the Grand Lodge made, the troubles it encountered and the difficulties it had to overcome. But, those difficulties resulted in a new Grand Lodge which appeared in 1751. Whole libraries have been written as to why. And if no historian is satisfied as to all the "whys", perhaps all of them together may have been the real motivation.

Of the mistakes of the first Grand Lodges, some wholly speculative features were important. The paragraph "Concerning God and Religion" in "Anderson's Constitutions" caused much dissension. Now we know that without that paragraph Masonry would not have survived – that its wholly non-sectarian character is its greatest strength. But in the formative days of the first Grand Lodge most Freemasons were Christian, even Trinitarian Christian. Religious dissension in modern lodges and Grand Lodges seems to us impossible; in the formative days it played a big part in the beginnings of the new, often called "schismatic", Grand Lodge.

The first Grand Lodge had much poor leadership (as well as some fine leaders). Anthony Sayer, apparently an operative Mason, was no real leader. Lord Byron (Grand Master 1747) appeared before his brethren but little – so little that there was an abortive movement to displace him.

There was much complaint about "irregular makings" – Grand Lodge kept a loose, not a tight rein, on its lodges and members.

Grand Lodge made a number of innovations in the then ritual and practice which were bitterly resented by many. Perhaps these changes had to be made. In its early years the first Grand Lodge ran head on into public ridicule and many exposes were published; these made it easy for scoundrels to pretend to Masonic rank and to have the authority to confer degrees – a crime, by the way, still with its criminals to practice it!

Of these changes the late, great H. L. Haywood wrote:

"Clandestinitism became so rife that at last Grand Lodge, in self-defense, determined upon making changes in the esoteric work that would enable regular lodges to detect frauds. It is now next to impossible to learn with certainty just what these changes were, but according to the enemies of the Grand Lodge of 1717 and to scattered references in Grand Lodge records they were somewhat as follows: The installation ceremony of the Worshipful Master was either abolished or suffered to go by default; the Third Degree was remodeled; the symbolism of the preparation of a candidate was changed; one of the most important secrets of the First Degree was transferred to the Second, and vice versa; some of the old 'geometrical secrets' long practiced among 'ancient Operative Masons' were either entirely omitted or else changed out of all recognition, etc. As a proof that such charges of innovations were not without foundation in fact is an entry in the Constitutions of the Grand Lodge of 1717, 1784 edition, which says, 'Some variations were made in established forms,' and this goes on to explain that these changes were made, 'more effectually to debar them (i.e. clandestines) and their abettors from the Lodges.'"

Besides all this there was much dispute concerning the degree of Royal Arch. The new, wrongly called "schismatic" Grand Lodge, in a master stroke by Laurence Dermott, its Grand Secretary, denominated as the Antients, desired the Royal Arch as a part of symbolic Masonry. The older, first Grand Lodge, called by Dermott the Moderns, did not practice it. And indeed this

difference must have been a powerful influence, as the Union, in 1813, specifically included the Royal Arch in pure ancient Freemasonry.

Finally there was the Irish question; the Moderns did not recognize Irish Masons and many of them wanted to join in London lodges.

So, from one cause or another, from many causes or all causes, came the new Grand Lodge of Antients and a most dynamic personality at its head and front as Grand Secretary.

Again quoting the indispensable Haywood:

"Dermott was born in Ireland in 1720, twenty-two years before the birth of William Preston, who first saw the light of day in Edinburgh, July 28, 1742, and who alone of all the luminaries in Freemasonry shares with Dermott an equal fame. Dermott was initiated in Ireland in 1740, and went through the chairs of Lodge No. 26, Ireland, where he was installed Worshipful Master, June 24, 1746. It appears that he was fairly well-educated for those days, and Gould is of the opinion that he probably knew a little Hebrew, which will account for the fondness he had of covering his papers with Hebrew characters – that ancient and difficult language! He moved to London, probably as a youth, with little in his pocket but many schemes boiling in his head, which head was tireless, alert, witty, sarcastic, and often a bit unscrupulous in waging war on his foes, of which his energy made him many. It seems that he engaged himself as a journeyman painter (Preston became a journeyman printer, it will be remembered) and that he prospered so that in after years he spent much money in charity and in Masonic activities. In late records he was described as a wine merchant, and it appears that he enjoyed the luxury of gout. Once made a Mason he never rested but devoted himself to it as to a mistress, with passionate earnestness, never permitting himself to become discouraged, and always in the front line of battle. Aside from his genius in putting a Grand Lodge under way his greatest achievement was the composition of his AHIMAN REZON (meaning Worthy Brother Secretary), the Constitutions of the new Grand Lodge, and afterwards adopted by many other Grand Lodges, our own Pennsylvania, Maryland and South Carolina among them."

The new Grand Lodge grew rapidly and there was "confusion in the Temple" in London; how should the profane distinguish between two Grand Lodges, two sets of lodges, two complications of claims? Dermott's master stroke of naming – the names stuck – added to the confusion for if the Antients were not ancient, what were they? And could the Moderns possibly be the older? Two Grand Lodges, two sets of lodges, disputes and quarrels among Masons, Irish Freemasons with Irish tempers and Irish determination (a majority in the newer Grand Lodge)... Freemasonry was in a sorry pass!

In a list of the Grand Secretaries of the Antient Grand Lodge it will be noted that Dermott served eighteen years: 1751, John Morgan; 1752-70, Laurence Dermott; 1771-76, William Dickey; 1777-78, James Jones; 1779-82, Charles Bearblock; 1783-84, Robert Leslie; 1785-89, John McCormick; 1790-1813, Robert Leslie.

Most instructive still is the list of Grand Masters elected: 1753, Robert Turner; 1754-56, Edward Vaughan; 1756-59, Earl of Blesington; 1760-66, Earl of Kelly; 1766-70, Hon. Thomas Mathew; 1771-74, John, third Duke of Atholl (also spelled Athol, Athole); 1775-81, John, fourth Duke of Atholl; 1783-91, Earl of Antrim; 1791-1813, John, fourth Duke of Atholl; 1813, Duke of Kent.

Of the sixty years during which the Antients had a Grand Master, a Duke of Atholl occupied the throne for thirty-one years therefore, the Antients were often called Atholl Masons." For a similar reason, the Moderns were sometimes called "Prince of Wales Masons."

Introduction to Freemasonry states:

Dermott kept the Antients a Christian body and wrote distinctively Christian sentiments and references into its Constitutions and its documents.

Meanwhile other Grand Lodges arose; they were not very important and never grew very large, but they belong in the story of Freemasonry; the "Grand Lodge of All England," "The Grand Lodge of England South of the River Trent," "The Supreme Grand Lodge," all made their bids for recognition, lived their little day and passed on, each leaving its trace, its influence, but unable to contend against the Antients and the Moderns.

The benefits which came from the clash seem today to be greater than the evils. Then Freemasons saw only harm in the rivalry which split the Fraternity. Now we can see that where one Grand Lodge established lodges on warships, the other retaliated with Army Lodges which carried Freemasonry to far places; where one body started a school for girls, the other retorted with a school for boys – both still in existence, by the way. Where one Grand Lodge reached out to the provinces, the other cultivated Scotland and Ireland. Both worked indefatigably in the American Colonies.

The heart burnings, the jealousies, the sorrows and the contests between the Antients and Moderns, if they exhibited less of brotherly love than the Fraternity taught, were actually spurs to actions. Without some such urge Freemasonry could hardly have spread so fast and so far. As the United States became a much stronger and more closely welded union after the cleavage of 1861-65, so Freemasonry was to unite at last in a far greater, stronger and more harmonious body when the two rival Grand Lodges came together, composed their differences, forgot their rivalries, and clasped hands across the altar of the United Grand Lodge.

The reconciliation is as astonishing and mysterious as the discord.

The death of Dermott, who was gathered to his fathers in 1791, fighting for the Antients to the last, removed one cause of difference between the two Grand Lodges; as the Antients had grown in power and prestige not only in England but in the Colonies until they outnumbered the Moderns in both lodges and brethren, the Moderns might well have thought that union would be

a life saver; time heals all differences and what had seemed important in 1751 in fifty years had dwindled in vitality.

What is amazing is that after the difficult period, when overtures were made, refusals recorded, committees appointed and differences finally composed, the Antient Grand Lodge, in accepting the idea of reconciliation, receded from almost all the positions for which it had fought so long! It was as if the spirit of combat, so alien to the gentle genius of Freemasonry, had worn itself out and brethren became as eager to forgive and forget and compromise as they had previously been strong to resist and to struggle.

Whatever the spirit which caused it, the final reconciliation took place in Freemasons' Hall in London, on St. John's Day, December 27, 1813. The two Grand Lodges filed together into the Hall; the Articles of Union were read; the Duke of Kent retired as Grand Master in favor of the Duke of Sussex, who was elected Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge.

The second of the Articles of Union reads: "It is declared and pronounced that pure ancient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more; viz, those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellowcraft and the Master Mason (including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch)."

In 1815 a new Book of Constitutions proclaimed to all the world forever the non-sectarian character of Freemasonry in this Charge concerning God and religion:

"Let a man's religion or mode of worship be what it may, he is not excluded from the Order, provided he believes in the glorious Architect of heaven and earth, and practices the sacred duties of morality."

Newson says of this:

"Surely that is broad enough, high enough; and we ought to join with it the famous proclamation issued by the Grand Master, the Duke of Sussex, from Kensington Palace, in 1842, declaring that Masonry is not identified with any one religion to the exclusion of others, and men in India who were otherwise eligible and could make a sincere profession of faith in one living God, be they Hindus or Mohammedans, might petition for membership in the Craft. Such in our own day is the spirit and practice of Masonic universality, and from that position, we may be very sure, the Craft will never recede."

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