

The Candidate

Unknown

Freemasonry first asks questions of the candidate for initiation, then questions about him.

A lodge must be satisfied as to five important matters; a petitioner's motive for applying for the degrees; his physical being; his mental equipment; his moral character and his political status, using the word in its non-partisan sense.

It is highly important that Freemasons understand that a man's motives for petitioning a lodge are proper, otherwise we cannot guard our West Gate from invasion by those who will not, because they cannot, become good Master Masons.

A man must ask for "Light, of his own free will and accord." Not only must he so declare in his petition, but nine times during his initiation he must repeat the statement. Here grow the roots of that unwritten but universally understood prohibition – no Mason must ask his friend to join the Order.

It is easy to persuade a friend to "join something."

We enjoy our country club – we would enjoy it more if our friend was a member. We put an application before him and persuade him to sign it; quite right and proper. We belong, perhaps, to a debating club or an amateur theatrical society, or a Board of Trade or a luncheon club. Enjoying these activities, we desire our friend also to have these pleasure so we ask him to become one of our circle.

An entirely proper procedure in such organizations but it is a wholly improper course in Masonry. Unless a man petitions the Fraternity impelled by something within himself, he must state an untruth nine times in his initiation. Unless he is first prepared "in his heart" and not in his mind, he can never grasp the simple but sublime essentials of brotherhood. To ask our friend to petition our lodge, then, is to do him not a favor but an injury.

In most Jurisdictions a petitioner is required seriously to declare upon his honor, not only that he comes of his own free will and accord, but uninfluenced by any hope of financial gain. There are men who want to become Freemasons because they believe that the wider acquaintance and the friends made in the lodge will be "good for business." So do men join the church or a bible class because they believe they can sell their goods to their fellow members. But the man who

desires to become a member of a church that he may sell it a new carpet will hardly be an asset to the house of God; he who would become a Freemason in order to get the trade of his fellow lodge members will hardly be in a frame of mind either sincerely to promise brotherhood or faithfully to live up to its obligations. Hence Freemasonry's need to obtain the most solemn declaration possible of the secret intentions, the real motives, the hidden desires of those who would join our Mystic Circle.

The "Doctrine of the Perfect Youth" is perennially a matter for discussion in Grand Lodges. The origin of the requirement that a man be perfect in all his limbs and parts goes back to the days before written history of the Craft. Mackey states that the first written law on the subject is found in the fifth article of the Old York or Gothic Constitutions adopted at York in A.D. 926:

"A Candidate must be without blemish and have full and proper use of his limbs; for a maimed man can do the Craft no good."

This requirement has been repeated, and again repeated at various times in many different forms; in the "Ancient Charges at Making" (1686) and in the "Constitutions of 1722-23" which put into print the customs and enactments of the Mother Grand Lodge in 1717.

The same Masonic authority makes the 18th Landmark read:

"Certain qualifications of a candidate for initiation are derived from a Landmark of the Order. These qualifications are; that he shall be a man – shall be un mutilated – free born and of mature age. That is to say, a woman, a cripple or a slave, or one born in slavery, is disqualified for initiation into the rites of Masonry."

Just how strictly this law should be interpreted is a moot question, and different Jurisdictions rule in different ways upon it. In no Jurisdiction, for instance, is a man considered to be ineligible because he wears glasses, or has a gold tooth! In most Jurisdictions he must be "perfect" with two arms, two legs, two hands and two feet.

In some Jurisdictions, if he can conform to the requirements of the degrees, he may lack one or more fingers not vital to the tokens; in other he may not.

The foundation of the doctrine was an operative requirement; obviously a maimed man could not do as "good work, true work, square work" as the able-bodied man. The requirement has been carried over in Speculative Masonry. Its greatest importance today is less in the need for physical strength and mobility than in undoubted fact that if we materially alter this Ancient Landmark, these old "usages and customs," then we can alter others; admit women, elect by a majority vote, dispense with the Tiler and hold our meetings in the public square! Physical qualifications have a further importance of a practical nature; other things being equal, the maimed man and the cripple are more apt to become charges upon the lodge than the strong and whole. Finally, the weak and feeble of body cannot offer to their brethren that same assistance in danger which the able-bodied may give.

Inspired by patriotism some Jurisdictions have relaxed the severity of their physical requirements in favor of soldiers who have suffered in behalf of their country. Into the argument pro and con as to the expedience of such relaxations this Bulletin can not go. Suffice it here that the lodge to which an applicant applies should be meticulously careful to see that the candidate conforms literally to the requirements as laid down by the Grand Lodge.

It is hardly necessary to say that the petition of a woman cannot be entertained under any circumstances whatsoever, nor need the reasons for it to be discussed here.

The mental qualifications required of a candidate are dictated more by the desires of the individual lodges than by any stated law. Many Jurisdictions have ruled that a man who cannot read is not an eligible petitioner, for the good and sufficient reason that he who cannot read cannot search the Great Light, nor discover for himself the by-laws of his lodge, the constitution of the Grand Lodge, or the Old Charges and ancient Constitutions.

The ability to read and write, however, important though it is, does not make a man educated! Nothing is said in our Ritual about the need of an education prior to becoming a Mason, but by implication a man is supposed to have sufficient educational background to be able to study the seven liberal arts and sciences. "Sufficient education" is a very broad phrase and may include all sorts of men, of all sorts of education, as, indeed, it does. A man may not know the multiplication table, murder the King's English, and believe geometry is something to eat; and yet be a hard-working, true-hearted, single-minded brother to his brethren. But it will hardly be doubted that if all Freemasons were of such limited educational equipment the Order would perish from the earth from the lack of appreciation of what it is, where it came from, and whither is it going!

First the friend who presents the petition; next the committee appointed to investigate; and finally the lodge must be the judge of what constitutes "sufficient mental equipment" to enable a man to become a good member of the lodge.

A few ritualistic lions are in the path. He who is silly, is childish, in his dotage, who is insane, is known to be a fool – may not legally receive the degrees. It is to be noted that "dotage" is not a matter of years but of the effect of years. A man of four score, in full possession of his mental faculties is not in his dotage. Premature senility may attack a man in his fifties; he may truly be in his "dotage." Similarly, a "fool" does not mean, Masonically, a man without what we consider good judgment. "Jones was a fool to go into that stock" – "He is foolish to try to build that house" – "What a fool he is to sell his store now" – do not really express belief that the man is a "fool" in the Masonic sense, merely that in these particular cases he acts as we think a fool would act.

Masonically, a man is a "fool" who suffers from arrested mental development. He is not mad, neither is he in his dotage, but he lacks the ordinary mental equipment and judgment ability of

the rest of humanity. Such a one, of course, is ineligible to receive the degrees, since he can neither comprehend nor live up to their teachings.

The moral qualifications a petitioner should possess are fully understood by all. The petitioner must express his belief in Deity. No atheist can be made a Mason. He must be “under the tongue of good report” – i.e., have a good reputation in his community. He must “obey the moral law.” But just how much is included in this phrase is an open question.

While a “moral man” may be hard to define, he is easy to recognize. Committees seldom have much trouble in ascertaining that a man “morally fit” to become a Mason is, indeed, so. The contrary is not always true – moral unfitness often masquerades under the appearance of virtue – hence the need for the competent committee.

In some Jurisdictions a separate ballot is taken on the candidate for the second and third degrees, to test his “moral fitness,” but usually the ballot which elects a petitioner to the degrees is considered to express the opinion of the membership on all his qualifications at once.

The applicant for the degrees must be “of mature and discreet age” (from the Old Charges). In this country that is the legal majority. In some foreign Jurisdictions it varies from eighteen, for a “lewis” or son of a Mason, to twenty-five.

Our requirement of legal age is dictated not only by the fact that Masonry is for men, and a youth does not become a man until he is twenty-one; but because to be made a Mason in the United States a man must be a citizen, and citizenship, in its real sense, is not held by minors.

Our political requirements are most explicit upon the question of being free born. Many have erroneously thought that such qualification was “read into” the body of Masonry to keep out men of the colored race. Unquestionably “free born” means not only not born a slave, but not born of parents who have been slaves, or whose forebears were slaves. Thus “free born” does bar men of African descent in this country from becoming a Mason.

But the provision was an integral part of Masonic law long before Africans were imported into this country – see the statute from the Old York Constitution already quoted. The custom even goes further into antiquity. In the ancient Mysteries of Greece and Rome, from which Masonry derives something of its form, similar law prevailed. No man born a slave, or made a slave, even if freed (manumitted) could be initiated.

It is practically a universal requirement that the candidate be a resident of the Jurisdiction to which he applies for a period of one year prior to making the application. A man who has not resided for a reasonable period in one place cannot have demonstrated to his neighbors the kind of man that he really is. A committee is handicapped in making an investigation of a man who is not among friends and neighbors. Grand Lodges are usually very strict about this; but Grand Masters occasionally, upon a very good reason being shown, grant dispensations to shorten the statutory period. A man who has resided in a Jurisdiction for ten months, let us say, is ordered to

Japan for three years. He desires to become a Mason before he departs. If he is satisfied that the applicant can show the committee his moral worth, a Grand Master may permit him to make application and receive the degrees before he departs. During the war, when all requirements seemed of less than the usual importance when seen in the fierce white light of patriotism; length of residence in a Jurisdiction was sometimes lost sight of.

A man considered worthy to have his petition placed before a Masonic lodge has much to recommend him. If the committee has done its work well, and, if on the strength of that report the lodge elects him. he may well feel that an important seal has been placed upon his reputation and character. That some committees do their work ill is evidenced by the occasional failures of brethren to walk uprightly. That the vast majority of committees are intelligent and faithful is proven by the reputation of the Fraternity and the undoubted fact that a man known to be a Master Mason is almost universally considered to be a good man and true!

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