

Address Given by RW Senior Grand Warden John Strickling of
the Grand Lodge of F. & A. M. of Alabama to the Rotary Club
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An Overview of the History of Freemasonry
And an Explanation of its Values

Submitted by K. Carpenter, Committee on Education and Public Relations, 2015

To the Presiding Officers, members and guests of The Decatur Rotary Club I wish to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak with you today about Freemasonry.

Let me start by giving you a very brief history of our craft; I will then attempt to explain who we are, who we are not and what we are all about. Hopefully I will dispel a few myths along the way.

The actual moment in time that Freemasonry began is lost to history. There are some historians who trace it back to the Assembly of Masons in York, England in 926, others to Roman times, and some even to the building of King Solomon's Temple. We do know that it started evolving into its present form at the close of the Cathedral building period in the 1600's. The Operative Freemasons had for centuries established Guilds or Lodges that allowed non-Masons such as Nobles, clergymen, scholars or prominent men to join.

These Operative Masons had knowledge in the arts and sciences of building and stone cutting that they passed on to the new apprentice. It was therefore necessary that these new

apprentices go through an initiation process and possibly take an oath that they would never reveal the secrets that they were to be taught to anyone other than another Operative Mason. They were taught how to recognize another craftsman by signs, words or grips.

By this knowledge they could set their own wages and negotiate their own contracts. "Free" Masons were allowed to travel and were not considered serfs, or tied to any estate or feudal lord.

The process of admitting non-Operative Masons accelerated as the building boom in churches or cathedrals slowed. As the number of Speculative Masons increased, the rituals and lessons of the Operative Masons were absorbed into the Speculative Masonic Fraternity.

There have been literally hundreds if not thousands of books written about Freemasonry over the past 4 centuries. Some in support of, others against the fraternity. Freemasonry has the allusion of being veiled in secrecy, of something sinister being conducted behind closed doors, with rituals and oaths, secret pass words and grips and handshakes. Some would think that if the Fraternity would go to this much trouble and have all these secrets then they must be up to something; surely a conspiracy of some kind must be taking place!

For almost 400 years, since the formation of the 1st Grand Lodge in England, the fraternity has been viewed with suspicion from various parties, wither it be individuals, governments or religious bodies. It is human nature to be suspicious of

something you don't understand and that has a veil of secrecy around it.

During this 400 year period there have been numerous charges from these same groups that the fraternity is trying to take over the world, that we are a religion, "devil worshipers", or we are a cult. At one time, for those of you who are familiar with American History, there was even an anti-Masonic political party. During this time, for the most part, the fraternity has chosen to remain silent and not to indulge in public arguments or defend its teachings, believing that the misinformed would only deny their own ignorance and fabricate new myths.

Through these past centuries Masons have been persecuted, imprisoned, tortured and put to death. Under the Nazi regime, estimates of between 80,00 to 200,000 Masons were sent to death camps and graded as political prisoners. They wore an inverted red triangle on their clothing to distinguish them as such. Those surviving wore "forget me knots" as a sign that they were still Masons.

Let us address who the Masons are not:

1. We are not a "secret society". Most of us wear Masonic rings, lapel pins, have Masonic license plates or emblems on our cars. Masonic Lodges are well marked in most communities with signs on the buildings. We publicize our meeting dates and events in local newspapers and on the internet.

We live in the information age. You can go on the internet and find out 90% or more of what goes on in a Masonic Lodge.

We do have certain knowledge whereby we can know another Mason. If we travel to a different city, state or foreign land, there are questions that will be asked and answered before we are admitted into their Lodge or enter into conversation about the fraternity.

2. We are not a religion! We offer no plan of salvation. We do not "convert" anyone. We have no theology or religious doctrine. We do not discuss religion or politics in the Lodge. We open and close all of our meetings with a prayer to the throne of grace!

This September 26th will mark 42 years that I have been a member of the fraternity. I am an active member of First Baptist Church in Decatur. The fraternity in no ways detracts from my faith and my commitment to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. If anything it has been strengthened by my association with good men of good character.

Let me add that my father was a Mason as was my Grandfather. Needless to say that these two men have had a very large impact on my life.

3. We are not trying to take over the world. If you would walk into a typical Masonic Lodge and look at the men present, they would all tell you that they would have difficulty in taking control of their own house.

If the Fraternity was intent on taking over this country then they had the perfect opportunity at the close of the revolutionary war. George Washington (a Mason), resigned his commission and returned to his home, Mt. Vernon, when he could have been King! King George III, of England, when hearing what Washington had done called him the "greatest man in the world".

A large number of the men who signed the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were Masons. Most of George Washington's top Officers were Masons. I believe 13 U.S. Presidents have been Masons.

The Masonic Fraternity has been on this continent since colonial days, before the United States was formed. It has been in this land when it was a territory, before Alabama was a State. The oldest Lodge in the State of Alabama is Helion #1 located in Huntsville which was chartered by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1811. The Grand Lodge of Alabama was Chartered in 1821 and your Local Lodge, Rising Sun Lodge #29 was chartered in 1827!

With having been here so long, and having had members with so much influence at the local, state and national levels, don't you think that if the goal of the fraternity was to take over anything that it would have already happened?

As Masons we are taught to be good citizens, to obey the law of the land and support the government of the country in which we live.

Then who are we?

We are 1.4 million men through-out these United States in 51 Grand Lodge Jurisdictions, which includes the District of Columbia. There are currently approximately 26,000 members of the fraternity in Alabama. The Masonic Fraternity along with its appendant bodies donates approximately 2 million dollars a day to various charities. Some of the appendant bodies of Freemasonry you may be familiar with are the Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (better known as the Shriners), The Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, The York rite of Freemasonry, The Grotto of North America, The Order of the Eastern Star, Demolay for young men, Jobs Daughters and Rainbow Girls for young women.

1. We are a group of men who believe that the "internal and not the external qualities of men are what we are to cherish". That all men in the lodge are equal; regardless of their station in life or the size of the personal wealth or lack thereof. That we are to aid, support and protect one another and come to the aid of the distressed, the widow and orphans of Brother Masons. To believe in God, honor him as the creator and giver of all life, to hold him in veneration and acknowledge him and give him thanks for all of our achievements; to go to him in prayer and seek his guidance in all things of this world and the next as each of our individual beliefs dictate..

2. We are a group of men, who believe in the "fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of man", who are taught to be tolerant of others religious faiths and to be truthful, open and honest in

our dealings with others. Freemasonry strives to make Good Men, BETTER!

3. We are your neighbors, friends, fathers, Grandfathers and uncles.

During the age of "enlightenment" Freemason Lodges provided a place, a forum, to discuss the new ideals of "brotherhood", equality, of rights of the individual, personal and religious freedom and to be tolerant of others beliefs. This at a time when everyone had a social or "caste system". These ideals were termed radical and those that promoted them as extremely liberal or as in the case of the American Colonies "revolutionaries".

These ideals found their way into our Constitution and Bill of Rights. We, as a fraternity, are no longer considered "liberal" or the ideals "radical" but now are looked upon as "conservative".

At this time in our Nation's history, when we see all the crime, violence and moral decay; our core values and religious beliefs being attacked; would you not agree that we need more organizations that promotes honor, honesty, integrity, to obey the "Golden Rule" do unto others as you wish they would do unto you.

To be a Mason, you must ask. No Mason is permitted to ask a person to join the fraternity. You must be 21 years of age and you must express a belief in God.

The literature at your tables is for you to take with you. You should have 3 pieces consisting of; "What's a Mason", "Who are the Masons" and a flyer on the "Grand Lodge of Alabama Child Identification Program".

The Child Identification Flyer is fairly self explanatory. This Program is offered by the Grand Lodge of Alabama to any organization, school, day care, church, etc. that wishes to utilize it at no cost to them or the Child. This Program is offered as a public service to aid in the recovery of lost or abducted children.

I am extremely proud of our Masonic heritage, and I am very grateful that you have allowed me to share this information with you. Thank you!