

The Myths, Origins, & History of Freemasonry

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Freemasonry traces its origins back to its loose organizational form during the late medieval Stonemasonry period. Freemason history encompasses three phases, including the emergence of operative lodges during the Middle Ages, the acceptance of speculative Freemasons, and the gradual growth of speculative lodges under the Grand Lodges that govern them. In 1717, the formation of the first Grand Lodge occurred in London. Due to the scarcity of written material, historians face difficulties in uncovering information about this fraternal organization. In fact, scholars from all over the world struggle with wading through a plethora of misinformation generated by Freemasons and non-Freemasons alike. As a result, the summation of the history of freemasonry requires years of research and resources to create a comprehensive outline of notable events and developments surrounding Freemason history. The information below traces the development of freemasonry starting with its organized bodies of operative stonemasons to the speculative lodges and Grand Lodges of today.

The Origins, Myths, and Theories

The earliest Masonic texts contain segments of information about the craft and mystery of freemasonry. According to The Halliwell Manuscript or Regius Poem created between 1390 and 1425, Masonic craft began with Euclid in Egypt. The Cooke Manuscript foretells how masonry stems from Jabal, son of Lamech, in Genesis 4:20-22. It also explains how it came to Euclid and then to the Children of Israel in Egypt before eventually finding its way to England during the reign of King Athelstan. This myth gave birth to subsequent manuscript constitutions that all trace Freemason history back to biblical times.

James Anderson of the Premier Grand Lodge of England created a palatable, modern form of these constitutions. His version traces freemasonry back to its biblical roots with Euclid as a pivotal point during its evolution. According to Anderson, the first grand assembly occurs with the English Masons at York under Edwin Athelstan, son of King Athelstan. Anderson expanded and revised his version of the "Gothic Constitutions" in 1738, whereby he listed the Grand Masters since Augustine of Canterbury. William Preston authored the *Illustrations of Freemasonry*, a text that expounded on this Masonic creation myth. In 1737, a French lecturer by the name of Chevalier Ramsay added the crusaders to the lineage. Ramsay stated that the crusaders revived the craft by uncovering secrets in the Holy Land. At this point, the history of freemasonry emerged from its roots established in England.

Diverse speculative theories surround Masonic ritual. Anderson's histories coupled with Ramsay's romanticism and the internal allegory of Masonic ritual with King Solomon's Temple as the framework, paves the road for further speculation. Hiram Abiff is credited as the architect of King Solomon's Temple where the earliest known ritual took place. From there, Masonic ritual made its way to Euclid, Pythagoras, Moses, the Essenes, and finally the Culdees.

Further developments in the myths of freemasonry took place when the Knights Templar became involved as cited in Karl Gotthelf von Hund's *Rite of Strict Observance*, a text that also made connections with the exiled House of Stuart. In 1745, an anonymous anti-Masonic work authored by Abbe Larudan emerged that

received criticism from Albert Mackey. Mackey dismisses Larudan's work as pure speculation without any historical credibility or factual basis. Christoph Friedrich Nicolai, another anti-Masonic author, claimed that Francis Bacon and the Rosicrucians were purposefully omitted from Anderson's first book of constitutions. Recent writings have connected the Knights Templar to freemasonry through a series of images depicted in the Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland.

- [The Halliwell Manuscript](#): A manuscript that cites the origins of freemasonry beginning with Euclid in Egypt.
- [The Constitutions of the Freemasons: An Online Edition \(PDF\)](#): A copy of James Anderson's Constitutions in electronic format.
- [The Illustrations of Masonry by William Preston \(PDF\)](#): A foundational masonry text that expounds on the Masonic creation myth purported by James Anderson.
- [The Symbolism of Freemasonry by Albert Mackey, MD](#): An electronic text of a book entitled The Symbolism of Freemasonry: Illustrating and Explaining Its Science and Philosophy, Its Legends, Myths and Symbols.
- [Encyclopedia of Freemasonry and Its Kindred Sciences](#): An encyclopedia of Masonic terms, meanings, and symbols.

Early History and the Grand Lodge Period

Early historical documents refer to masons as workers of freestone, limestone, or grainless sandstone. The term Freemason may infer that the masons were not enslaved, indentured, or bound by a feudal system. While this differs from speculative freemasonry, it still holds importance to Scottish operative lodges. When referring to medieval masonry, the lodges and the stonemason guilds were workshops prior to becoming meeting places for operative masons, until the emergence of speculative freemasonry, which eventually led to the formation of Grand Lodges.

The formation of the first Grand Lodge emerged somewhere between 1716 and 1726. The assembly of four lodges and a few elders that began in 1716 led to the formation of the first Grand Lodge. These four lodges included the Goose and the Gridiron, the Apple Tree, the Crown, and the Rummer and Grapes. The elders probably belonged to the Cheshire Cheese and one other unknown lodge. The assembly took place on June 24th, 1717 at Saint Paul's Churchyard. During the assembly, the group agreed to meet four times a year to discuss business. In addition, they decided to elect a Grand Master of the lodge every year. During the first annual meeting, the assembly elected Anthony Sayer as the Grand Master of what has become known as the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster. At this time, the first Grand Lodge most likely saw themselves as an association of London lodges; however, this perception changed quite rapidly.

The following year, George Payne became Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster. In 1719, John Theophilus Desaguliers was elected as Grand Master. Desaguliers is often referenced as the father of modern freemasonry and inscribed the dedication found within Anderson's Constitutions. This led to the formation of the "Gothic Constitutions." Desaguliers advocated Masonic ritual by memory instead of through the written word. As a result, there is a void in written material on the subject.

Desaguliers' approach led to a rise in self-publicity and the sudden explosion of speculative masonry literature. In addition, anti-Masonic groups and publications started to arise as a direct result of this sudden growth. Freemasonry also gained recognition in newspapers. The election of a new Grand Master garnered public accolades. This led to additional ridicule by anti-Masonic groups, which led to the discontinuation of the practice some years later. Ex-masons followed suit by thinking they could make some extra money by exposing the secrets of freemasonry.

- ["The Genesis of Freemasonry"](#) By Douglas Knoop, M.A., Hon. A.R.L.B.A.: A web-based book that explains the rise of operative, accepted, and speculative Freemasonry.
- [Freemasonry](#): An overview of freemasonry from the Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment, the revised edition.
- [The Masonic Trowel](#): John Theophilus Desaguliers: An excerpt explaining the influences of John Desaguliers on freemasonry.
- [The Origin of the Ritual](#): An article that explains the origin of Masonic ritual.
- [Matawan Lodge No. 192 F&AM: Famous Masons in History](#): A comprehensive list of famous freemasons in history.

Freemasonry in the United States of America

Henry Price, the Provincial Grand Master of North America for the Grand Lodge of England, allowed a group of Boston Freemasons to form the Saint John's Lodge in 1733. This became the first lodge formed in the United States of America. Shortly afterward, Grand Lodges began to appear in Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania and South Carolina. This led to a rapid expansion of practicing freemasons in the United States. By the 18th century, the United States had many independent lodges, including self-starters that applied for Grand Lodge authorization only when they knew they would survive. The Lodge of Saint Andrews in Boston, also known as the first chartered Scottish lodge, hosted many known public figures, such as Paul Revere, Joseph Warren, and the Boston Tea Party. While still holding true to British, Scottish, and Irish Grand Lodges, America had spawned one group of fifteen rejected masons that changed the face of the fraternal order by forming what is now known as Prince Hall masonry.

- [Freemasonry and the United States Government](#): An essay on the establishment of freemasonry in the United States.
- [Prince Hall and His Organization of Black Free Masons in the United States](#): A narrative, timeline, and activities regarding Prince Hall Freemasonry in the United States.
- [Prince Hall Freemasonry \(PDF\)](#): An overview of Prince Hall Freemasonry in the United States.
- [Saint John's Lodge](#): A brief history of Saint John's Lodge.

The Great Schism

Freemasonry has gone through its moments of dissension and separation. In 1753, a rival group called the Antients broke away from the Moderns of the Grand Lodge of England. The Antients formed their own Grand Lodge due to their frustrations over the Grand Lodge of England's sudden changes to create secret modes of recognition.

The Antients consisted primarily of working class individuals, whereas the Moderns were more aristocratic, educated, and less orthodox in their religious views.

The schism eventually mended in the years following 1813, when competing Grand Lodges merged to create the United Grand Lodge of England (UGLE). This amalgamation returned the modes of recognition back to their old ways, as they existed prior to the schism. It preserved the three degree recognition in an ambiguous way that led the Moderns to think their Antient Royal Arch degree was an optional degree higher than the already established levels. The merger also leveled the playing field for social class equality and education among Masonic members.

The second great schism in freemasonry occurred after 1877, when the Grand Orient de France started to accept atheists. While the split between the Grand Orient de France and England occurred over atheism, the English also disagreed with the French's recognition of women in freemasonry and co-masonry. In addition, the English frowned at the French's willingness to discuss religion and politics in their lodge. The schism between the two branches has not always stood; in fact, it has been breached on special occasions for short periods of time. Another schism occurred between the Grand Orient de France and the Grand Lodge of Louisiana in 1868. Territorial, race, and color issues were the cause of that schism, which led to the withdrawal of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana from the Grand Orient de France.

- [The Masonic Union of Strict Initiation Observance](#): Freemason History: An overview of Masonic history.
- [All There Is To Know About Freemasonry](#): A website that addresses everything there is to know about freemasonry, including information about the two great schisms.
- [Cyrstalinks: Freemasons](#): A webpage listing general information about freemasonry, including the two great schisms.
- [The Origins of Freemasonry](#): An article sharing general information about freemasonry.
- The Grand Orient of Ireland: The History of Freemasonry: A Grand Lodge shares their perspective on Masonic history.

Present-Day Freemasonry

The history of Freemasonry has impacted the way the fraternal organization operates today. Modern freemasonry has spread throughout the world, with many lodges belonging to local areas. Each lodge elects officials to govern its members, such as the Worshipful Master and the Tiler, and to carry out Masonic functions. Freemasonry consists of three degrees or levels, including the Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason. The Entered Apprentice title is given to an individual being initiated into the Masonic Order. The Fellow Craft title is given to members learning about the process. A Master Mason title signifies that the initiate has earned the highest level in freemasonry.

Freemasonry saw an explosion in popularity after the Second World War; however, the number of new members joining has dropped since the turbulent 1960s. As a result, lodges have launched efforts to gain new members. Many active masons participate in charitable events, and help others in their communities. Despite these efforts, the fraternal organization continues to receive bad publicity from anti-Masonic propaganda machines.

- [The New Anti-Masonic Movement in America \(PDF\)](#): A document explaining the growing anti-Masonic movement in America.
- [Would You Want to Be a Freemason?](#): The BBC shares an article on the image of freemasonry today.
- [The Myths of Freemasonry \(PDF\)](#): A document addressing the myths surrounding freemasonry.
- [Masonic Service Association: Organization of Freemasonry](#): A webpage describing the organizational structure of freemasonry.

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