

# AND THE GREATEST OF THESE IS CHARITY

---

*Brent Morris is a member and Past Master of Patmos Lodge #70, Ellicott City, Maryland. He is currently working on an update of the Scottish Rite (NJ) publication "Masonic Charities" of which this STB is an extract. Bro Morris is a well known Masonic author and we at MSA thank him for putting the Masonic Charities information together for us.*

*Within the text are several references to early examples of Masonic Charity, MSA would be very interested in learning if there are earlier examples than the ones quoted. If you know of an earlier Masonic charitable act that occurred within the United States or Canada please let us know. --Editor*

Charity is a universal characteristic of Freemasonry. Whether help for a community offered by a local lodge, or a Masonic home supported by a State Grand Lodge, or the national network of Childhood Language Disorders centers maintained by local Scottish Rite Brethren and the Supreme Council, S.J., or the Shriners' hospitals for crippled children, American Masons are part of a centuries-old tradition of caring. It doesn't matter if it's a Lodge, a Consistory, or a Masonic stamp club, each will have charity as a significant part of its activities. However varied the activity, each effort has one goal: helping those in need.

A study of Masonic Charities is a study of the evolving needs of American society. When food and shelter were immediate and almost daily concerns, Masons responded with firewood and the fruits of their harvests. When care of the aged, widows, and orphans were worries, Masons erected retirement homes and orphanages. When education was needed, Masons built schools, and when these basic needs moved ever farther from common experience, Masons turned their philanthropy to crippled children, burn victims, the speech and language impaired, cancer patients, and others.

As with most human endeavors, Masonic actions speak louder than Masonic words. Consider the first two official actions of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island after organizing and installing its officers on June 27, 1791.

[T]he Brethren walked in Regular Procession to Trinity Church where an Excellent discourse was delivered by the Reverend William Smith, Rector thereof, & a collection made of \$11.9.4 Law. Money to be invested into Wood & distributed to the Poor of this Town the ensuing Winter.

Proceedings of the M.W.G.L. of Rhode Island

Even our courts have taken judicial notice of the Masonic tradition of caring:

The objects and purposes of said Order are to nurse, care for and to provide for its sick, afflicted and needy members und their families, bury the dead, care for the widows of its deceased members, and care for and educate their orphan children, and to inculcate in its members the principles of morality, temperance, benevolence and charity and teach them their duly and true fraternal relationship to mankind. *Denser v. State of Missouri* (1947)

With this rich tradition of sharing comes the Masonic ideal of anonymous good works (exemplified by the Scottish Rite Almoner). This presents a problem for historians: How can the extent of Masonic charity be recorded in the face of a conscious effort to keep it very private? The dilemma was partially solved by the book *Masonic Charities*, edited by Brothers John H. Van Gordon and Stewart M. L. Pollard and published in 1985 by the Supreme Council, N.M.J. At that time Brother Van Gordon undertook the unique (and daunting) task of accounting for every dollar spent on charity by American Masons in 1985. An updated and rewritten form of this important volume with figures for 1990 is now being prepared and will be published jointly by the Northern and Southern Supreme Councils. A brief preview of this new book follows.

In the development of social services in the emerging nation, the Masonic definition of charity diverged sharply from that of many states. Dorothy Ann Lipson captured this idea clearly in her 1977 book, *Freemasonry in Federalist Connecticut*.

Masonic charity differed in its underlying assumptions and in its style from civic charity. In Connecticut charity was available to the settled members of a town, regulated by law, and invoked in times of extreme need and as a last resort. Persistent vestiges of the older Puritan ethic; which associated misfortune with divine retribution, made appeals to civic charity a painful necessity. Masonic charity, more broadly defined than its civic counterpart, was available to its members in times of personal crisis wherever they were. (p. 213)

Masonic charity was secret unlike civic charity whose administration made the entire town privy to the needs of each recipient. The derogation of character implicit in acknowledging poverty must have compounded suffering. In contrast the Masons asked, " What has the world to do with private transactions, whether a widow, an orphan, or a pilgrim has obtained relief ?" (p 207)

A touching example of this private, compassionate relief during personal crisis is cited by Prof. Dumenil on pages 208-209. Federal Lodge in Watertown, Connecticut purchased a cow for the use of a widow and her children, and the cow was carried on its books for several years as a Lodge asset, presumably to spare the family the embarrassment of accepting charity.

From the very earliest days of Masonry in America, charity has been a concern. Look at the following extract from the 1733 ByLaws of the First Lodge of Boston, believed to be the oldest record of American Masons setting aside funds for charity:

Monthly Every Member shall pay at Least two shillings more per Quarter to be applied as Charity Towards the Relief of poor Brethren.

While charity assessments were a common feature of many early American Lodges, their records are shy about specific instances of private relief. The first explicit record of Masonic relief in

America seems to be in the Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia. On November 4, 1754, "a petition from a member and indigent Brother, John Spotwood, was read, and on motion of the Lodge, he was given one pound 12 shillings and sixpence 'to relieve his necessity.' " (R. Heaton and J. Case, *The Lodge at Fredericksburg*, P. 34)

Grasping the subtle nuances of the interlocking relationships of Masonic organizations is a simple task compared to cataloging their expenditures. As Prof. Lipson observed, "Masonic charity was secret unlike civic charity whose administration made the entire town privy to the needs of each recipient. "Thus the researcher can only capture the data from aid that went through formally organized and public Masonic activities, but even this doesn't tell the whole story."

For example, the Masonic Service Association quietly oversees a Hospital Visitation Program with a goal that every V.A. Hospital in the United States have a Masonic volunteer working with patients. How can a value be placed on the more than 500,000 hours a year spent on this work? It just can't be done! The best that can be done is to catalog that fraction of Masonic philanthropy that happens to be administered on a formal basis and to rest content in the knowledge that Masons today, as always, are seeking to provide relief for suffering humanity.

The new book divides American Masonic philanthropies into several major categories: 1) public hospitals and clinics; 2) medical research; 3) Masonic homes, hospitals, and orphanages; 4) scholarships and youth; 5) museums and public buildings; and 6) community support. Each category represents the efforts of hundreds of thousands of American Masons to put Masonic teachings into practice. The book will try to give a detailed analysis of each category.

The bottom line is this:

In 1990, American Masonic philanthropy was over \$360 million, or more than \$986 thousand per day, of which over 70% went to the American public.

Public Hospitals and Clinics Medical research Masonic Homes and Orphanages Scholarships, Youth, & Museums Community Support