

FREE AND ACCEPTED

The origin of these terms, descriptive of Speculative Freemasons, goes back into the very beginnings of the history of the Order; indeed, behind the history of the building Craft in Europe.

But it is only in keeping with the antiquity of the teachings of Freemasonry. Many of our symbols and their meanings go back to the very childhood of the race. Through these a direct relationship may be traced in mind, heart and ideal; if not in written document, to such diverse ages and places as China four thousand years ago, the priesthood of ancient Egypt and the Jews of the Captivity. For purposes of understanding the genesis of the word "Free" as coupled with Mason, it will suffice to begin with the Roman "Collegia", orders or associations of men engaged in similar pursuits. Doubtless their formation was caused partly by the universal desire for fellowship and association, particularly strong in Rome, in which the individual was so largely submerged for the good of the Empire, and partly by economic necessity, just as labor unions are formed today.

These "Collegia" speedily became so prominent and powerful that Roman Emperors attempted to abolish the right of free association. In spite of edicts and persecutions, however, the "Collegia" continued to exist.

The Colleges of Architects, however, for a time were sanctioned even after others were forbidden. They were too valuable to the State to be abolished, or made to work and meet in secret. They were not at this time "called" Freemasons, but they were "free" - and it is the fact and not the name which is here important. Without architects and builders, Rome could not expand, so the colleges of Architects were permitted to regulate their own affairs and work under their own constitutions, free of restrictions which attempted to destroy the "collegia."

Then, as now, "three" were necessary to form a College (no Masonic lodge can meet with less than three); the College had a "Magister" or Master, and two Wardens. There were three orders or degrees in the College which to a large extent used emblems which are a part of Freemasonry. Roman sarcophagi show carvings of square, compasses, plumb. level and sometimes columns.

Of the ceremonies of the "Collegia" we know little or nothing. Of their work we know much, and of their history enough to trace their decline and fall. The Emperor Diocletian attempted to destroy the new religion, Christianity, which threatened so much which seemed to the Romans to make Rome, Rome. Many members of the Colleges of Architects were Christians - a very natural result, since these associations had taught and believed in brotherhood because of a common Father, the members of the College or Architects took for their own his doctrine, so strangely familiar.

Persecution, vengeance, cruelty followed; this is not the place to go deeply into the story of the four Masons and the Apprentice who were tortured to death, only to become the Four Crowned Martyrs and Patron Saints of later builders and the Masons of the Middle Ages. Suffice it that the

College of Architects were broken up and fled from Rome. Comes a gap which is not yet bridged. Between the downfall of Rome and the rise of Gothic architecture in Europe we know little of what happened to the builders' "Collegia." It is here that we come to the fascinating theory of the Comancines - that some of the expelled builders found refuge on the Island of Comacina in Lake Como, and, through generation after generation, kept alive the traditions and secrets of the art until such time as the world was again ready for the Master Builders. All this is fascinatingly set forth in several books, best known of which is Leader Scott's "Cathedral Builders, the Story of a Great Masonic Guild." The author says that the Comancine Masters "were the link between the classic "Collegia" and all other art and trade guilds of the middle ages. They were Freemasons because they were builders of a privileged class, absolved from taxes and servitude, and free to travel about in times of feudal bondage.

During the Middle Ages and the rise of Gothic Architecture, we find two distinct classes of Masons; the Guild Masons who, like the Guild Carpenters, Weavers or Merchants were local in character and strictly regulated by law, and the Freemasons, who traveled about from city to city as their services were needed to design and erect those marvelous churches and cathedrals which stand today inimitable in beauty.

It may not be affirmed as a proved fact that the Freemasons of the Middle Ages were the direct descendants through the Comancine Masters of the Colleges of Architects of Rome, but there is too much evidence of a similar structure, ideal and purpose and too many similarities of symbol, tool and custom to dismiss the idea merely because we have no written record covering the period between the expulsion from Rome and the beginning of the Cathedral building age.

However this may be, the operative builders and designers of the Cathedrals of Europe were an older order than the Guild Masons; it is from these Freemasons - free of the Guild and free of the local laws - that the Masonry of today has come. Incidentally, it may be noted that the historian Findel finds the name Freemason as early as 1212 and the name occurs in 1375 in the history of the Company of Masons of the City of London.

The history of the Freemasons through the Cathedral Building Ages up to the Reformation and the gradual decline of the building arts, needs volumes where here are but pages. But it must be emphasized that the Freemasons were far more than architects and builders; they were the artists, the leaders, the teachers, the mathematicians and the poets of their time.

In their lodges Speculative Masonry grew side by side with their operative art. They were jealous of their Order and strict in their acceptance of Apprentices; strict too, in admitting Apprenticed to be Fellows of the Craft, requiring seven years of labor before an Apprentice might make his Mater's Piece" to submit to the Master and Wardens of his lodge, when happily, he might become a Fellow and receive "the Mason Word."

No fools built the great Cathedrals of Europe.

Mathematics. architecture, strength of materials, the principle of the arch, proportion, unity, beauty - all had to be practiced by experts to produce these tremendous structures, on which the most modern science and art cannot improve.

It was only natural then, that the Masters desired a high quality of Craftsmanship. Only Apprentices of character and willingness to learn were accepted. Only those who could make a perfect Master's Piece were accepted as Fellows. Doubtless only the most expert and learned of the Fellows could ever hope to be Masters.

Then, as now, to secure fine workmen they began early and trained them long. As a workman who was immoral, a drunkard, a gambler, a loose liver could not hope to learn to do good work, or to be trusted with the operative secrets; it was essential that moral precepts and philosophical lessons be incorporated into operative lodge life.

Unquestionably the building crafts from the earliest ages - ate, even back of the Roman Collegia - incorporated speculative teachings with operative instructions given to Apprentices. This practice grew and expanded during what may be termed the formative period of the Fraternity. The Cathedral Builders of the Middle Ages must have been a little world unto themselves in the towns in which they worked.

They would employ the local Guild Masons for the rough work, but strictly excluded them from their lodge when meetings were held. Doubtless these meetings were frequent, perhaps nightly, to discuss the great work being done.

Young Apprentices, like young men the world over, would skylark and want to have a good time. Their elders would reprove and read them a lesson in a simple parable of the building art. The square, the compasses, the trowel, the chisel, the mallet, the gavel and the setting maul would all be brought into such lessons.

And so, through year after year and age after age, the teachings of Speculative Masonry grew. And as is invariably the case the thing which was used as an example to teach, gradually came to symbolize the lesson taught. To be "square" was at first but an essential of a tool and an ashlar. Universally now, a "square man" is an honest one. Trowel and gavel took upon themselves significancies far beyond their operative use. Master after Master would add from his store of learning; lesson after lesson would be incorporated with an operative practice, until the Speculative Art and the Operative Craft were, apparently, dependent upon each other.

It is world history that knowledge cannot be kept from those who seek it. By hook or crook, in one way or another, the student will find that which he seeks.

In an age when learning was difficult to get, and association with the educated was hardly to be had outside the church, it was but natural that thoughtful and scholarly men should desire membership among Freemasons.

Other men, thoughtful but not scholarly, would see in the Speculative teachings of the Masons that road to knowledge which was otherwise hard to find. Neither, however, would want to practice operative Masonry, serve seven years apprenticeship or make a Master's Piece.

Just how such men accomplished their desire and became “accepted” members of the Order we do not know. Doubtless they had something to bring to, as well as something to get from their operative brethren.

But we do know the fact; a place was made for such seekers after the light. Distinguished by the title “accepted” that they might not be confused with “free” Masons, these non-building members encouraged and expanded the speculative side of Masonry.

It is not possible to say when this practice began.

The Regius Poem, the oldest document of Freemasonry (1390) speaks of Prince Edward (twentieth century) as:

“Of Speculatyfe he was a Master.”

Ecclesiasts, desiring to become architects and builders, joined the Order. Lovers of liberty were naturally attracted to a fellowship in which members enjoyed unusual freedom among their fellows.

Gradually the “accepted” or Speculative Freemasons equaled, then outnumbered the operative craftsmen and slowly but surely the Craft came to be what it is today, and has been for more than two centuries, wholly Speculative in character.

Through the years, particularly those which saw the decline of great building and coming of the Reformation, more and more became the Accepted Masons and less and less the operative building Freemasons. Of forty-nine names on the roll of the Lodge of Aberdeen in the year 1670, thirty-nine were those of Accepted Masons.

Hence our title - Free and Accepted Masons - abbreviated F & A.M. United States Grand Lodges style themselves under several different abbreviations: F.& A.M., F. and A.; A.F. & A.M.; and other variations using the Ampersand (&) in place of the word “and.” The District of Columbia still uses F.A.A.M., meaning Free and Accepted Masons, in spite of the possible confusion as to whether the first “A” stands for “and” or “ancient.” The variations are accounted for both by difference on origins, some Grand Lodges coming into being with lodges held under the “Ancients” and some from the “Moderns” and by variations due to the errors which are seemingly ineradicable in “mouth to ear” instruction.

But of all of us, regardless of what order we choose for “Ancient,” “Accepted,” “Free” and “Masons,” all are “Free and Accepted.”

It is one of the glories of the Craft that her historians can trace such derivations into such a long gone past. That Mason is dead of soul, indeed, who cannot thrill to the thought that as a Free and accepted Mason he is kin not only to those ancient brethren of Old England who first began the practice of “accepting” good men because they “were” good men, not because they were builders, but also to the builders of ancient Rome and all the generations which sprang from them, who were “Free” of the bonds which bound less skillful and esteemed workmen.

