

FREEMASONRY AND PUBLIC EDUCATION

This months Short Talk Bulletin was prepared by M. W. Sidney Kase, Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Washington, Originally written as a paper on the "Washington Masonic School Awards Programs." the paper was broadened to show why it is so important for all Freemasons not only to support Masonic Education but Public Education as well. --Editor

Why should the Masonic fraternity concern itself with high school students in the public schools? Is this one of our legitimate concerns?

There are several reasons, and as is often the case, these become more apparent in the light of history.

In the Middle Ages, illiteracy was the accepted norm. Common people were mostly agrarian laborers, beholden to some form of nobility. They were serfs, little better than cattle. Practically no one could read or write, except the clergy and a few others. Even the nobility were more often than not illiterate. There were no public schools, only private tutors. Until the Renaissance and Reformation periods there were no colleges. The closest thing to such were the theological seminaries and monasteries. In the hey-day of the cathedral builders, there was one other avenue for learning: vocational apprenticeship.

Among the Operative Masons, a Master Mason would take in one or two apprentices, young men of sound mind and body, little past puberty. He would house them, board them, clothe them and for all practical purposes "adopt them" as his sons for a period of about seven years. During this time, the apprentice was taught the skills of the building trade, along with other learning that was considered necessary for the society of that period. This included grammar, rhetoric, arithmetic, geometry, social and political topics; whatever his mentor was capable of providing. As the young man progressed in his work with mortar and stone, his skills became more advanced until eventually he was allowed to submit his "Masters piece." If that piece of work passed his master's rigid examination, the applicant likewise became a Master Mason or Journeyman, capable of seeking work independently. In turn, the process was repeated. This was very primitive education, but it was education. It could be compared somewhat, nowadays, to a post-graduate student preparing a thesis to obtain a Master's or Ph.D. Since printed communication was not possible, because it had not yet been invented, and because few could read anyway, stories were told by means of "morality plays" easily understood by the audience. In the cathedrals, the stained-glass windows were used to depict Biblical characters and events. Hence the origin of the phrase. "Two storied" building or "Five storied" building, depending on the number of such windows (or stories) they portrayed. Today, of course, we use the term to describe the height of a building.

As time went on, scholars, philosophers, clergymen and even nobility sought to associate themselves with these Operative Masons' Lodges, what we might classify as "Associate Members." This was a great compliment to the Lodges who were generally highly regarded for practicing a high level of morality, intellectuality and integrity. Men in the upper levels of society sought to associate themselves with this highly esteemed and privileged group. They became elitist and much sought after. It was, for those times, an anachronism to see royalty, nobility, men of high military or social rank, scholars and philosophers mixing on an equal level, socially, with these craftsmen of the building guilds--the Freemasons. Outside the Lodge, it was, "Your Excellency, Sir", but within the Lodge it was "Brother." Certainly, this must have constituted the "Culture Shock" of that period. As the need for the services of Operative Masons dwindled, their numbers became proportionately less in these Freemasons' Lodges, until the "Speculative" Masons outnumbered the Operative Masons, as has been the case ever since. The Speculative Masons, however, retained the working tools of the Operatives for use as symbols in their evolving rituals. Whatever this peculiar fraternity of Freemasons was, it quickly spread over the entire civilized world. Today there are about five million Masons scattered over the globe in every "free" country. You are not apt to find any in those governed by dictatorships, or where forbidden by religious or political intolerance.

Concurrent with this creeping spread throughout the world, the industrial revolution was being introduced in England and other European countries. One of the products thereof was the Gutenberg Bible, the first book printed with moveable type, about 1455 A.D. The availability of the Bible to common people, not just the clergy, fostered literacy and with it an increased demand for education. With the dawning of the Age of Enlightenment, both Protestant and Roman Catholic groups began to offer formal education to more people. Thus parochial schools were the fore-runners of all other types of schools. Private schools (non-parochial) then appeared. Public schools came much later.

Boston Latin School, one of the oldest free public schools in the United States, opened in 1635 as a school for boys. The Massachusetts Legislative Body passed a law in 1647 which required each township of fifty families to engage a teacher to instruct children in reading and writing. Each township of one hundred families was required to have a grammar school. This may be regarded as the inception of the American public school system, and it established three basic principles:

- (I) The obligation of the community to establish schools
- (2) Local school administration
- (3) The separation of the secondary from the elementary school.

Even in the early years of the Twentieth Century, children were required to attend school only up to the eighth grade.

Secondary education began in New England with the establishment of the Boston Latin School noted above. Graduates of this and similar grammar schools were qualified for admission to Harvard College, which was founded in 1636. There was nothing in between at that time. The founding of Harvard was followed by Yale in 1701, partly because it was believed that Harvard was too liberal in theology. Brown College opened in 1764, as a Baptist institution whose charter

rejected the religious tests for admission and provided that faculty and students "shall forever enjoy full, free, absolute and uninterrupted Liberty of conscience." Dartmouth College was founded in 1769 under the aegis of the Congregationalists for the training of Ministers and Indians, (an odd combination)?

At this juncture, let's introduce the role of the Masonic fraternity, as it pertains to public education. Consider, if you will, that Freemasonry and the schools are basically in the same "business", the "people business". We tell our initiates that our Masonic teachings are designed to make them wiser, better and happier. We are a philosophical fraternity, but we're also an educational institution. We're concerned about people; we deal with people; we develop people; we educate people. Although we are no longer engaged in the building of cathedrals, we are concerned with developing character, leadership, better individuals, better family men, better citizens.

Our Masonic forefathers supported the idea of free universal education for the citizenry, which was true to their belief that a builder is an enlightened man. We're generally the first to take practical steps in support of public education in any newly developing area. As our Masonic Brethren joined in exploring the burgeoning "New World", led by Lewis and Clark, other Masons were to be found among the pioneers who moved into and developed these areas. One of their first endeavors in a new community was to build a Masonic Lodge. Generally, this was a two-story structure with the ground floor to serve as a school room, the upstairs as the Lodge room.

The first Masonic jurisdiction to introduce the idea of a Masonic school or college was Ohio, and this action was quickly followed by a number of other Masonic jurisdictions. In 1924, Frederick Eby, a professor at the University of Texas, wrote: "The services of the Masonic Lodges in conducting schools and furnishing buildings must be regarded as one of the most important transitional steps toward free public education. A certain parallelism can be noted between the educational program of the Grand Lodge and the later organization of public education in the state". (Frederick Eby, 'THE DEVELOPMENT OF EDUCATION IN TEXAS', 129, quoted in James Carter, Education and Masonry in Texas to 1846.)

Originally, the intent was to provide education for orphans or indigent children of Masons at a minimum expense. This trend was in vogue until after the passage of the Morrill Land Bill of 1863, which assured the supremacy of State "Land Grant" institutions of higher education. Thereafter, Masonic Colleges became obsolete, as the need for them disappeared.

Note: "Henry Wilson Coil, in his Masonic Encyclopedia, reminds Freemasons that public schools have become political institutions and that the fraternity is not well suited to carry out political activities or to direct the course of government. He adds that there are several reasons why Masonic educational ventures proved to be impracticable; Masonic membership in the western and southwestern states at that time was not large enough to supply a student body, and money was in short supply. Churches too have found the load of carrying on schools to be so great that other sources of revenue and control had to be found."

We need not go into the long list of Masonic educators, scientists and others connected with the educational system. That is a whole story in itself. By now, it should be apparent to the reader that Masons were intimately interested and active in educational matters.

We Masons believe that we in the United States have the finest group of young people anywhere in the world. We deplore those who deprecate all our youth on account of those few about whom we read in the media. Perhaps they are notorious because of their individual, family or personality situations. Certainly every one is presented with the opportunity for personal achievement. Naturally, this requires commitment, effort, and work. Not all are willing to pay the price. That is a side issue to which Masons are not indifferent; witness our Masonic National Drug and Alcohol Abuse Program.

Motivation plays a part in every kind of activity. What is the motivation for Masons to foster and promote the numerous school awards programs and scholarships that we have? It is this: Freemasonry wishes to build better people and better tomorrows. Freemasonry is firmly committed to building a better community and a better world. For these reasons, we feel the nurturing of the leaders of tomorrow's society is vitally necessary! Freemasons, collectively, must support the public school system. We recognize the unique opportunity that scholarship and awards programs offer in recognizing and supporting tomorrow's leadership. That, in a "nutshell", is what school awards and scholarship programs are all about.

We are depending on our young people for the future, but for the present, we must let them know that they can depend on us!