

FROM WHENCE CAME WE?

By common consent, the Missouri river flows into the Mississippi river. Yet, had geographers named them otherwise, the upper Mississippi might have flowed into the Missouri!

Stand near the mouth of the mighty river which drains a continent and none will dispute you when you say "This is the Mississippi!" No man may pick up a cup of its water and say "this is the Missouri River water, yonder is a drop or two of the Ohio; beyond flows some of the Arkansas river." We know that the Mississippi river is made up that tiny stream which rises in Lake Itaska in northern Minnesota, joined by the Missouri, the Ohio, the Arkansas, the Red river, the Minnesota, the Des Moines, the Illinois, the Yazoo. Each of these has a hundred tributaries; each of these tributaries is formed by thousands of creeks, springs, runs, brooks - all combined flow into the Gulf of Mexico as the mighty Mississippi.

It is a commonplace of primary education that the first colonies on this continent began in Massachusetts, New York and Virginia.

Thirteen states formed the United States. An Empire was won by war with the Indians, purchases from other nations and conquest of the West. Into this land of opportunity have poured people from all other nations. Negroes were imported from the savage African wilds a few hundred years ago. Irish, French, Germans, Russians, Polanders, East Indians, Swedes and Norwegians; all came, settled, married, intermarried - the melting pot melted, and from the poured metal came the race of Americans.

But - "from whence came the United States? Where does the Mississippi really rise?"

No man may answer because the truth is so complex and has so many ramifications. Only when we lump them all in one phrase and say "The United States originated in the world" and "the Mississippi comes from all over the continent" do we phrase the truth and then, while truthful, it is not an answer!

Much the same is true of Freemasonry. "From whence came we?" is as unanswerable in a sentence, a paragraph, a page - aye, in a book - as in a query as to the origin of the nation, or its mightiest river.

The United States is a product of time and all peoples; the Mississippi is a product of a thousand streams; Freemasonry is the product of a hundred cults, religions, organizations, crafts, guilds, beliefs ideas and associations.

Masonic historians are generally agreed on its course for a hundred years back, at least. The most cautious critic will not deny that the Mississippi is the Mississippi, and not some other river or combination of rivers, at least from the Gulf to Cairo, where the Ohio empties - or it is the Mississippi which empties into the Ohio? Documentary evidence sufficient for any court of law

carries the Masonic stream back at least two hundred and fifteen years, to the formation of the Mother Grand Lodge in London, in 1717.

The vast majority of Masonic historians go confidently much further.

Comparatively few dispute that Freemasonry as we know it (Speculative) is an outgrowth of an older Operative Masonry, composed of builders, architects, stone cutters and setters. But before them - what?

Our earliest document (Regius Poem) is dated with considerable confidence about A.D. 1390. But it is obviously a copy of an older document or documents, and speaks of a Craft evidently full grown, working and organized. From whence came it?

A chorus answers "From York, England, in the year 926!"

And before it can be interrupted, it speaks of the Regius Poem, the Cooke Manuscript, the labors of Hughan, Mackey and others, as evidence that the General assembly of Masons actually was held in the old city at the date set forth.

Without prejudice let us agree for the moment - but then, from whence came those ancient York Masons?

This time the answering chorus is deafening! A very learned student (A.E. Waite) offers the mystical theory - that Freemasonry is the modern repository of the "Secret Doctrine" supposed to have been preserved in many religions, in many lands, in all ages. Leader Scott and W. Ravenscroft (to mention only two) argue convincingly that the Collegia, driven from Rome, took refuge on the island of Comancina in Lake Como, there to preserve for centuries the arts and knowledge of the masons of Rome, until the world was again ready for the Master Builders. The theories that Freemasonry originated among the Kaballists, the Hermetists, the Rosicrucians, the Essenes or the Drues have many devout believers. Le Plongeon, the explorer, found evidence which satisfied him that Freemasonry in a certain form existed among the Mayas nearly twelve thousand years ago!

Agree for a moment on one of these theories - consider that modern Freemasonry is, indeed, a lineal descendant from the Roman Collegia, "Via" the Comacine Masters. Again we come to the question - from whence came the Roman Collegia?

Answers are not lacking! "From the Dionysian Artificers, from the Eleusinian Mysteries, from the religion of ancient Egypt" - the choice is wide and the field free. But always the searcher for truth ends with a question; no matter how far back he carries his stream of investigation; no matter how well satisfied he is that it is the Missouri which flows into the Mississippi; that Americans are direct descendants from Anglo-Saxons; always the question remains - From whence? From whence comes the first river? From whence came those who founded the nation? From whence came those who began the Eleusinian Mysteries; the progenitors of the Dionysian Artificers; where did the priests of Egypt obtain the legend of Isis and Osiris? The average brother in Lodge is apt to retort "Oh Well, these are all side issues! There must be have been

some one main stem of Freemasonry. Perhaps all these other sources had something to do with it, just as water from the Red River does get into the Mississippi. But there must be some one parent, some backbone of the system, just as there is one stream which flows north and south, and which is the Mississippi, and into which all others flow.”

Alas, “There must have been” is not an argument! It is merely a supposition, based on everyday analogies; the tree has a trunk, and many branches; the flower has a stem, and many leaves. Therefore, Freemasonry must have had trunk, and many branches; therefore, our Order must have descended from this, or the other previous association.

It would be an intense satisfaction to many if “there must have been a main stem of Freemasonry” could be proved to be true. So far the “proof” is of so many “main stems” that the logical minded cannot admit any one to the exclusion of the others.

No one can read Ravenscroft and Leader Scott - even the Comacine article in the modern edition of Mackey’s encyclopedia - and not be convinced that there is “something in it.” But if the Comacine theory is the real truth, we must cast aside a number of other theories, each of which has excellent arguments and some evidence to attest its verity.

Questions as to origins are the more difficult of answer, because the line of reasoning which satisfies one man leaves another critically unbelieving. One historian demands documents, written evidence, something he can hold in his hand and read with his eye. Another is content to reason by similarities of practice. Thus, circumambulation is a descendant, through many religions, rites and secret associations, from nature worship in general and fire worship in particular. Therefore, says this believer, the real origin of Freemasonry must be looked for among the fire worshippers! A third man is led (or misled) by similarities of symbols. The Chinese used the square as a moral symbol at least four thousand years ago; the “principle of acting on the square” was enunciated in the Far East long before our Golden Rule was phrased. But few, if any, contend for ancient China as the cradle of modern Freemasonry. As well believe that because we trace the point within a circle to the most ancient religion of India, therefore among the Parsees or the Brahmins are the beginnings of Freemasonry to be found.

Man’s early culture in all lands had certain similarities, which seem to have been inevitable. The bow and shaft was a means of making fire in many primitive tribes. No one race can claim the discovery of weaving; indeed, primitive looms in lands as widely separated as South America and Ireland show similarities of spreader and heddle, which seem impossible, except as separate inventions of the same thing by different people because of similar needs.

It is reasonable to suppose that square, point and circle, triangle, circumambulation, pillars, altar, compasses, gavel (to mention only a few of the older symbols) were not the inventions or discoveries of any one people, religion, association, priesthood or Craft; but the product of needs as far flung as the ancient peoples of the earth. If, indeed, there was “one point of origin” on the earth’s surface, at which the first man came into being and from whose tribe all other peoples are descended; and, if it could be proved that this one tribe had a religion in which these symbols were associated with moral teachings; then, indeed, we might with confidence answer the question “From Whence Came We?”

Needless to say, there is no such point, tribe, religion or symbol known!

It will be obvious that this paper does not attempt to answer the question which is its title, with any hard and fast dogma. Even the orthodox school does not attempt a dogma. Perhaps the most generally accepted (orthodox) belief as to the beginning of Freemasonry may be phrased somewhat as follows: the Craft is a descendant of Operative Masons. These Operatives inherited from unknown beginnings, of which there may have been several and probably many, practices and some form of ritual. Speculative Masonry, reaching back through Operative Masonry, touches hands with those who followed unknown religions in which, however, many of the Speculative principles must have been taught by the use of symbols as old as mankind and therefore universal, and not the product of any one people or time.

This phrasing may draw criticism from those who are convinced of the sufficiency of our knowledge of these "unknown beginnings." The proponent of the Comacine theory will point to his Comacine knots, and defy the orthodox to disprove the descent of modern Freemasonry from the Roman Guilds. He who believes that the legend of Hiram Abif is the heart and center of Freemasonry in all ages, will demand disproof of his belief that Isis and Osiris were its father and mother!

But the burden of proof rests with those who propose a theory! Freemasonry had no one origin, at any one city, in any one nation. It was not formed by any one set of men, any one guild or association, at any one building.

Here a root descends to a religion; there a branch waves in the air of an old mystery. Yonder is a path to a guild of craftsmen; here a devotee lays a symbol on its altar. From primitive magic, from ancient religions, from mysticism, symbolry, the occult, architecture, history, Pagan rite and Christian observance; come each with some influence. The Jews had a part in it. "The Greeks had a word for it." Savages contributed; servants influenced it; Kings made laws about it; humble men followed it. Ages of time, millions of men, thousands of cults, hundreds of localities, beliefs as many as men who subscribed to them, all were drops which ran over sands and rocks, the hills and the valleys of history, to unite in this stream, that brook, this spring, that creek, this rivulet, that water fall; which, running each into each, uniting one at a time, gradually formed the river which we call Freemasonry.

So consider, "all" the hypotheses may be correct. No other theory can reconcile the evidence and the arguments, nor is any other viewpoint sufficiently elevated to get a true perspective of what we know of this mighty torrent which we call the Ancient Craft.