

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MASSACHUSETTS FREEMASONRY

Introduction

A study of the history of Freemasonry in Massachusetts is a task that is almost impossible to encompass in a single presentation. The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, A. F. & A. M., was constituted in its present form in 1792, and has two antecedent Grand Lodges, one originally created by England in 1733 and one by Scotland in 1756, which gives it a provenance and a precedence that dates back nearly three centuries. Massachusetts is the third-oldest regular Grand Lodge in the world, preceded only by England and Ireland, and is the oldest Grand Body in the Western Hemisphere.

As a thorough treatment of its long and complex history of the Fraternity in our state, the following presentation is merely a pale shadow of what a good historian would expect; but it has the advantage of coming to completion in a single sitting. I hope that is a sufficient introduction that interested Brothers can use it as a framework to learn more.

It is divided into five chronological sections: the early period (through 1792); the expansion and recovery period, which includes the Antimasonic era, taking us through 1867; the growth and modernization period, through 1920; the prosperous

twentieth century period, through 1980; and the last forty years, which have brought great changes to Massachusetts and to the Fraternity writ large.

Early Period (1733-1792)

In 1733, Henry Price, an English Freemason residing in Boston, made a trip to London to procure a charter for a lodge for Masons in the Bay Colony. His request to the Grand Lodge of England brought him more than he had expected: instead of receiving only a charter, he was warranted as Provincial Grand Master – with the ability not only to make Masons, but also to charter Lodges. On July 30, he opened the Provincial Grand Lodge of Massachusetts, and granted the charter of First Lodge of Boston, and it is from this date that the Grand Lodge takes its precedence.

Freemasonry in America was a very small enterprise in the middle eighteenth century. Massachusetts' Grand Lodge was an important institution in spreading the Craft throughout the New World, founding lodges in New England, most of the American colonies, and the Caribbean; many of these lodges became a part of subsequently founded Grand Lodges and Provincial Grand Lodges.

The English provincial Grand Lodge (styled “St. John’s Grand Lodge of Massachusetts”) had more constituent lodges beyond the boundaries of Massachusetts than within it, and also tended to be parochial and patrician in its

worldview. Indeed, at least in Boston, it belonged to the “South End” part of the town, with stately houses and wide avenues, and avoided the “North End”, with narrow streets and bustling wharves. Thus, aspiring Masons and those from lower classes who were already in the Fraternity did not find the doors of First Lodge (and, eventually, Second and Third Lodge) open to them.

Accordingly, in 1756, a group of Masons in Boston petitioned the Grand Master of Scotland for a charter, which was readily granted, and thus the Lodge of St. Andrew was born. This lodge did not exist in amity with the other lodges in the town. In 1769, the Brothers of the lodge petitioned the Grand Lodge of Scotland for their own Provincial Grand Master; at the end of that year Dr. Joseph Warren was installed as Grand Master of the Massachusetts Provincial Grand Lodge, which was formed by the Lodge of St. Andrew and two military lodges meeting in Boston at the time.

By the outbreak of the Revolution, St. John’s Grand Lodge was operating under its fifth Grand Master: after Price, Robert Tomlinson, Thomas Oxnard, and Jeremy Gridley had each been appointed in turn by the Grand Lodge and had died in office. In 1768 John Rowe became the new Grand Master, appointed by the Modern Grand Lodge of England, and was presiding when hostilities broke out. It is an exaggeration to consider the St. John’s Grand Lodge Tories and the Massachusetts Provincial as Patriots; but Rowe *did* own some of the tea dumped in the harbor in 1773, and Warren *did* die during the battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. It is sufficient to

say that the war and subsequent independence in America substantially affected the fortunes of both Grand Lodges. When Warren was killed, the Grand Orient of his Grand Lodge was left vacant for nearly two years, at which time that body chose its own successor – Joseph Webb, a Boston merchant. He and Warren’s brother John would serve as Grand Master for most of the remaining years during which that Grand Lodge operated.

When both Rowe and Webb died in 1787, the two Grand Lodges began moving haltingly toward union. They came from different traditions, employed different standard work, and represented a substantial division in the Masonic world in New England and beyond – but in March 1792 they were able to effect a union that lasts to this day – the united Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. The last Grand Master of the Massachusetts Provincial and now Independent Grand Lodge was the well-known Brother Moses Michael Hays, who along with John Warren became a distinguished Past Grand Master; and Rowe’s interim successor John Cutler was elected to the East of the new body. The only lodge left out of the union was the portion of the Lodge of St. Andrew that had separated in 1783 and remained loyal to the Grand Lodge of Scotland until it permitted its charter to be endorsed in 1809. By this time, most of the lodges outside Massachusetts (excluding Maine, which was a part of the state until 1820) had joined other, newly-formed Grand Lodges.

Expansion, AntiMasonry, and Recovery (1792-1867)

Following the formation of the united Grand Lodge, membership in the jurisdiction grew in significant numbers. Grand Master Paul Revere chartered 25 lodges from 1795 to 1797, John Cutler's son-in-law Samuel Dunn chartered 19, and his successor Isaiah Thomas chartered 13. Thomas also confirmed the charter of American Union Lodge in its new location in Ohio, and chartered an additional lodge in that state.

Many lodges chartered during the early 19th century – excepting, interestingly enough, those created under Grand Master Revere – have long since disappeared. Some were chartered in places unable to support a functioning lodge; others fell behind in payments due the Grand Lodge; and many were swept away by the tide of Antimasonry that arose in consequence of the Morgan Affair in western New York in 1826.

This incident, which led to a nationwide movement in the 1830s and 1840s, devastated the Fraternity, particularly in the Northeast part of the United States. Some Grand Lodges ceased to function, while others faced catastrophic declines in membership and activity.

In the early 1830s, the Massachusetts Grand Lodge resolved to build a grand hall, despite a clause in their state corporate charter that forbade it. It was reasoned that

the opposition within the legislature to an alteration of the terms of the charter would subside by the time the building was built. This was not the case, and the completion of the building led to a conflict with authority: the state legislature demanded that the Grand Lodge disband – but their response in the Declaration of the Freemasons of Boston and Vicinity in 1831 declared that their existence was not dependent on government whim, and their right to assemble was guaranteed by their rights as American citizens. Subsequently, the Grand Lodge surrendered its corporate charter, conveyed the building into the hands of a trusted Brother, and survived the storm.

By the middle 1840s the Antimasonic fervor – a story in itself, beyond the scope of this lecture – had largely burned itself out, and Massachusetts, like most of the rest of the Craft across America, had begun to recover. The first new lodges in a generation were chartered in 1845 and 1846, and the Fraternity embarked upon a period of remarkable growth. During this era, the prolific Charles W. Moore began publishing the *Freemason's Monthly Magazine*; Scottish Rite and York Rite Freemasonry started to assume the forms we recognize today; and Massachusetts expanded the scope of its jurisdiction to Chile and China. Even the American Civil War, which devastated and remade society, did not halt its growth: if anything, the practice of the Craft among the soldiers of the contending armies accelerated interest in our rites.

In Massachusetts, Grand Masters Coolidge and Parkman granted dispensations and administered a handful of Army lodges, tied to specific Massachusetts regiments, and those that became Masons or practiced Masonry in this way returned home with greater energy to expand and enlarge the Craft. Leadership in Massachusetts underwent a significant sea change, with a younger generation of principals, raised in the period after the Antimasonic hiatus, taking charge, with a large number of new Lodges being created and a large number of new Masons being raised. Parkman himself chartered twenty-five lodges between 1863 and 1865, many of which still exist today.

By the time the concord between the Northern and Southern branches of the Scottish Rite was effected in 1867, Freemasonry, particularly in Massachusetts, was a vital, active and dynamic organization, looking hopefully toward the future.

Growth and Modernization (1867-1920)

In April 1864, the Grand Lodge suffered the loss of its new home in the renovated Winthrop House Hotel. It had moved to new, larger quarters in 1858, selling its previous building to the United States government; this building was consumed by fire just six years later. The Grand Lodge elected to rebuild, constructing an even more grand structure at the same site; this magnificent building was dedicated in the fall of 1867. On the one hand, the celebration showed the popularity and growth

of the Fraternity; on the other, it created a large amount of debt for the Grand Lodge. This was a problem that simply would not go away.

During the next dozen years, Grand Masters Dame, Gardner, Nickerson, Everett, and Welch made efforts to levy a capitation tax on members to try and reduce this debt, with only partial success. When Samuel Crocker Lawrence, a Civil War veteran and well-known Masonic figure, became Grand Master, he made it a high priority to eliminate this debt. Over his three years' term in office, he traveled tens of thousands of miles by rail, carriage, and horseback to visit every lodge in the state, sometimes multiple times, to convince them to pay the tax – and was successful, as by 1884 the debt was completely retired.

Freemasonry in Massachusetts continued to grow over the next few decades, despite some setbacks, such as the death of a Grand Master during his first year in office, and another fire in the Grand Lodge building in 1895, resulting in its demolition and replacement by the one we presently occupy. Nonetheless, the Grand Lodge entered a new century poised for even greater growth.

During the years prior to the Great War, Massachusetts' presence in China and Chile continued to grow; in 1912 this extraterritorial jurisdiction grew with the addition of Sojourners' Lodge of Panama, originally under the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Other lodges were founded in the American Canal Zone, leading to the

creation of a District Grand Lodge in 1917 by treaty with the Grand Lodge of Panama, which Massachusetts had helped establish. The need for administration in faraway places such as China and Panama, among many other reasons, led to a complete overhaul of the Grand Constitutions of the Grand Lodge under the Grand Mastership of M. W. Leon Abbott – though much of the credit for the work goes to his immediate predecessor, M. W. Melvin M. Johnson, who was a giant figure in the Fraternity for the first half of the twentieth century – not only in Massachusetts, but as Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite, and as a renowned Masonic writer, thinker, and jurist.

Twentieth-Century Freemasonry (1920-1980)

Like most Masonic jurisdictions, Massachusetts benefitted from the enormous upswing of interest in the Fraternity during and directly after the Great War. In 1920 alone, in Massachusetts, 11,000 new Masons joined the ranks. Grand Master Arthur Dow Prince, whose term lasted from 1920 to 1922, chartered 30 lodges during this period, often in towns where lodges already existed. Most of these no longer exist today, having merged into parent lodges as numbers declined. Prince's successors Dudley Ferrell and Frank Simpson also chartered a number of new lodges, sometimes for specific groups such as newspapermen or realtors, sometimes for cultural groups such as Jewish brethren.

The Great Depression and the Second World War had a significant impact on the Fraternity, reducing overall membership and making it difficult for lodges and the Grand Lodge to continue to function. Between 1930 and 1945, only three lodges received charters, and none at all after 1932. Lodges in China were devastated by the Japanese invasion, but were largely restored at the end of the war – only to be shut down by the Communist revolution in 1949. In March 1950, these lodges were placed in indefinite recess, a condition which prevails to this day – though of the five remaining lodges, one was able to return to work in Tokyo in 1952. Sinim Lodge is presently the most distant of all lodges under Massachusetts Constitution.

After the Second World War Freemasonry in general enjoyed another dramatic growth period, with men returning from abroad eager to renew or extend their fraternal relationships. A number of new lodges were chartered between the late 1940s and the middle 1960s. This growth, however, unlike that of earlier eras, masked an emergent problem in the Fraternity: despite the large number of new Masons coming in the tyled door, a fair number of those new brethren were leaving by the untyled one. It is obvious – in long hindsight – that the leaders in Massachusetts at least had no idea, and would not realize the full import of that situation until the Fraternity, sufficiently out of step with the changing society in America, stopped gaining new members in the same numbers as only a few years before. By 1980, the numbers had caught up, and the Fraternity in Massachusetts –

and elsewhere – was in serious trouble. The solution, in part, would be the resolution of a conflict that had been ignored for nearly two hundred years.

The Modern Era (1980-Present)

Thus far, this presentation has focused exclusively on mainstream Freemasonry: the Craft and its traditions passed on to us from England and Scotland – prepared by and presented by and for Caucasians. In the narrow view of historical perspective, it is clear that there are many from the eighteenth century to the twentieth who would certainly have wanted it to remain that way.

Nonetheless, the mysteries of Freemasonry *were* communicated to a group of free black men in Boston sometime before the Revolution by the officers of a military lodge; this group's leader was a free man of color named Prince Hall. While not immediately a member of a regular lodge, there is no question that he was regularly made; and there is also no question that he and his associates were granted a charter under the Grand Lodge of England. After this point, and after the Revolution, the story diverges based on what you have been told. It is certain that the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts was not prepared for, and certainly not interested in, adding African Lodge to its rolls; and it was not prepared to allow a lodge of another jurisdiction to work within the borders of its own – except for the

Lodge of St. Andrew. Grand Master Revere issued an edict forbidding that very thing in 1796, a dozen years after African Lodge received its English charter.

Whatever the nature of relations between whites and Blacks in New England before independence, it was markedly changed after. The one turned its back on the other, at least within the Fraternity; there was no opportunity for men of color to join regular lodges – with rare exceptions it would not occur well into the 20th century. The argument was, and remained, that African Lodge became irregular when it failed to live up to the terms of its relationship with England, leaving Brethren of color with no avenue to participate in the Craft. From the perspective of Prince Hall and his companions, there was only one choice: to go their own way. Mainstream Masonry constructed an elaborate justification, based on precedent and legality – but it ultimately came down to racism, pure and simple.

It is not possible within the scope of this presentation to give a full accounting of a long and storied history of the Prince Hall tradition. It is remarkable, and deserving of its own lecture. But by 1980, despite a few halting attempts to cross that divide – in 1946 and in 1971, both met with skepticism at best and outright hostility at worst – it remained insoluble, a Berlin Wall in the Fraternity, not only in Massachusetts but elsewhere.

By the 1980s, the absence of most of a generation's worth of young men in the Fraternity had begun to take its toll. Starting in 1973, lodges unable to properly function began to merge or even surrender charters. The Panama District began its decline with the ending of the Canal Zone authority in 1979; the changing demographics and the societal competition for attention depressed interest in fraternal organizations generally. Freemasonry was secretive – perhaps seditious; it was apparently wealthy, but parsimonious and disengaged; and it was, of course, almost entirely white.

Grand Masters beginning with M. W. and Reverend Arthur Melanson, whose term of office ran from 1978 to 1980, began to address these problems by trying to “open up” the Fraternity – to families, to communities, and to the general public. Our Grand Lodge was among the first to do this, but it was a trend that was replicated across the United States. And beginning in the early 1990s, the effort extended to an approach – quiet and out of the spotlight – to come to terms with the world of Prince Hall Freemasonry. Most of the story of that approach is yet to be written, and there were many difficult turns; but in 1995, following the recognition of the regularity of the Prince Hall Grand Lodges by the United Grand Lodge of England, M. W. David W. Lovering, Grand Master of Massachusetts, was able to meet M. W. Edgar R. MacLean, Grand Master of Prince Hall Massachusetts, on the level at a Quarterly Communication. Over the next twenty-five years, forty-two other states have recognized their Prince Hall counterparts; and by direction of our Grand

Lodge, we recognize any Prince Hall Grand Lodge that is in amity with its mainstream one in that state. There are still a few holdouts, but the last quarter century has begun to heal the wounds of two hundred years. It is a sign of the direction we need to go, and we need to go further.

The last four decades have brought many changes to the Fraternity. In the 1990s, the Grand Lodge permitted the conferral of the three symbolic degrees in one day, usually once per three-year Grand Master term. This practice has continued to the present, allowing lodges to gain members who witness the degrees in the fashion generally used by the Scottish Rite. The retention rate for one-day Masons is substantially the same as that for Masons initiated in the usual fashion, which is both disheartening and encouraging.

Freemasonry in Massachusetts has made a significant effort, particularly during the last two decades, to reach out to communities and to promote itself in public, through charitable and other events, to be more transparent and more visible. This is in stark contrast to the rather circumscribed style of the decades and centuries prior, when its unwillingness to engage (even with its critics) led to the fostering and development of all sorts of criticism and derision, ranging from simple disparagement to unhinged conspiracy theory. The Internet has only magnified this problem, and it continues to this day. Social media is a two-edged sword for the Fraternity, as it is for almost any organization, but it is something that simply

cannot be ignored. Grand Lodges, however, have successfully used it, as well as other online avenues such as websites – including my own *masonicgenealogy.com* – to broaden understanding and interest. We are making progress.

Conclusion

History is ultimately a story about people, and it is neither inaccurate nor trite to keep in mind the many great Masons whose tireless effort and workmanship have erected the edifice which we enjoy today in Massachusetts. There are missteps and failures, decisions which are sometimes difficult to judge by contemporary standards – things we could have done better, or differently, or sooner, or not at all. But that is true of every human endeavor.

We are approaching a significant anniversary; in 2033 our Grand Lodge will celebrate its 300th anniversary. Most of our members, as one might expect, only know the most salient points of our history: they can name Henry Price, and Paul Revere, and Joseph Warren, and whoever was Grand Master when they were raised; they know 1733, and possibly 1792, and maybe one or two other dates. It is the task of the historian to know more and to tell stories about other things, to captivate his audience with them, to establish a connection between the past and the present. It is an uphill battle, but a worthy fight.

Our membership is younger overall than it was forty or fifty years ago. This is because we have begun to make a connection with a younger constituency, and also because the greatest generation of Americans and Freemasons is disappearing as we watch. We are trying to retain their stories, to understand their contributions, while realizing that we must look forward and not backward. I tell younger Masons that the “good old days” are *right now*, where we have tools like online forums to meet each other and communicate our message. When we reach our 300th birthday in a few years, we will be commemorating the past – but with all such things, it is far more important for us to look to the future. May we always do so, while preserving our tenets and prizing our Brotherhood.