

What Means “Ancient Free and Accepted

George Helmer FPS, 1923

Can you give us an explanation of the words, "Ancient Free and Accepted Masons," which appears to be the official name of our Grand Lodge? The Secretary of our local lodge tells me that about one-half of the Grand Lodges in the country have the same title, but that the others have it shortened to "Free and Accepted Masons". I know that there have been many explanations of these words taken separately in back numbers of THE BUILDER, but I should like to see them treated together. - D. L. H., Iowa.

The word "Mason" has been defined in many fanciful ways, as when one writer derives it from a Greek word meaning "in the midst of heaven," and another finds in it an ancient Egyptian expression meaning "children of the sun"; but it is almost certain that the term came into existence during the Middle Ages to signify a man engaged in the occupation of building. Originally it had merely this trade significance; it was only after Masonry became a secret society that it took on a wider significance. Of course there were builders long before the Middle Ages, but they went by other names, just as today we often speak of them as "architects," a term that came into use in the time of Queen Elizabeth.

Builders of the Middle Ages, like all other workmen, were organized into societies, somewhat similar to, but by no means to be identified with, our trade unions, which were known as guilds. These guilds were permitted to make their own rules, and they were given a monopoly of the work done inside their own territory. The builder guilds were usually more important than others, because their work was more difficult and required a high degree of skill and intelligence; such of them as had in hand the erection of the great cathedrals possessed among their membership the outstanding geniuses of the times, and wrought such works as to this day remain our wonder and despair.

The art of building was, according to the customs of the time, held as a trade secret, therefore the young men entering a guild of builders were solemnly obligated to divulge no secrets of the craft. Inasmuch as the work was difficult these young men were given a long course of education under the direction of a Master Mason, in which, so it is believed, the tools and processes of building were used symbolically and in order to impress certain truths on the mind of the member. In this way, and because the builders were in close touch with the church which employed systems of symbolism as today we use books (the people could not read, but they could understand pictures), the builder guilds came in time to accumulate a great wealth of symbolic teaching and an elaborate ritual. In the eighteenth century this symbolical element completely displaced the original craft of actual building, and Masonry became "speculative," as we know it now, so that we are Masons only in a symbolical sense.

We are called Masons therefore because we are members of an organization that harks back to the time when builders and architects were bound together in closely guarded guilds. But why are we called "Free" Masons? This is a more difficult question to answer, as all our Masonic scholars have discovered, for in spite of a great amount of careful research, they have never yet agreed among themselves as to how the question should be answered. We have records of the word as having been used six hundred years ago, but it is evident that even then "freemason" was a term of long standing, so that its origin fades away into the dimness of a very remote past.

One of the commonest theories is that the freemason was originally the mason who worked in "free stone," that is, stone ready to be hewn and shaped for the building in contrast to the stone lying unmined. Such a mason was superior in skill to the quarrymen, who dug the stone from the quarry, and this is in harmony with the fact that in early days freemasons were deemed a superior kind of workmen and received higher wages than "the rough masons"; but it does not explain why carpenters, tailors and other workmen were also called "free".

Another common theory has it that the early Masons came to be called "free" because they were exempted from many of the tiresome duties that hemmed in the labourer of the Middle Ages, and enjoyed liberties such as the right to travel about (forbidden to most workmen of that period) and exemption from military service, etc. It is held by some writers that the early Popes granted bulls to Masons that freed them from church restrictions, but no amount of search in all the libraries of Europe, or in the records of the Roman Church (that church did not issue bulls against Freemasonry until 1738 and afterwards), has ever succeeded in unearthing a single such bull or any record thereof. There are other theories. One has it that a Mason was free when out of the bonds of apprenticeship and ready to enjoy the full privileges of membership in his guild. Another, that there were grades of workmen inside building guilds and only the highest type were permitted all such privileges, and that these were called "free" in contrast to their less advanced brethren.

One of the most acceptable of all these theories is that so brilliantly advanced by G. W. Speth in the past century, in which that learned brother held that in the Middle Ages there were two types of builders' guilds, those that were stationary in each town and those that were employed in the cathedrals and were therefore permitted to move about from place to place, or wherever cathedrals might be in course of construction. In as much as cathedrals represented the high-water mark of skill and learning in that day such workmen were very superior to those that were employed on the humbler structures in the community, such as dwellings, warehouses, docks, roads, etc., so that Freemasonry descended from the aristocracy of medieval labour.

I have never been able to make up my mind as between these various theories, except that it appears to me that Speth's is the most plausible. It may be that several of them are true at one and the same time; such a thing would not be impossible, because Freemasonry developed over a large stretch of territory and through a long period of time. There is no doubt that in some cases this word has its face meaning and serves to remind us that our Craft is very old. The first Grand Lodge of Speculative Masons was established in London in 1717, but Masonry, even of the Speculative variety was very old by that date. Boswell was accepted into the Craft in 1600, Moray in 1641 and Ashmole in 1646. Our oldest manuscript, usually dated at about 1390, looks backward to times long anterior to itself. There is no telling how old Masonry is; perhaps they are not so far wrong after all who date it in antiquity. In any event it is "ancient," and has every right to the use of that word.

But in the majority of cases this word doubtless refers to the Grand Lodge that came to be organized in England shortly after 1750. When the first Grand Lodge (that of 1717) was formed it was planned that it should have jurisdiction only over a few lodges in London, but as these lodges increased in number it extended its territory to include the county, and later on to include the whole country. A large number of lodges remained independent -they were often called St. John's lodges - many in the north of England, and others in Scotland and Ireland. As time went on there grew up a feeling among the brethren of several of these independent lodges that the new Grand Lodge was becoming guilty of making

innovations in the body of Masonry, therefore, after a deal of agitation had been made, a rival Grand Lodge was formed, and because its older sister Grand Lodge had made changes they dubbed it "Modern," and because they themselves claimed to preserve the work according to its original form, they called themselves "Ancient." This Ancient Grand Lodge was fortunate in securing as its Grand Secretary Laurence Dermott, who had such a genius for organizing that in the course of time this newer lodge began to overshadow the older. The rivalry, often bitter enough to be described as a feud, lasted until 1813, when the first step toward a union was effected; out of this effort at reconciliation there came at last "The United Grand Lodge of England." Meanwhile the Ancients had chartered a great many lodges in the colonies of America, and these, a large number of them,, carried on the name long after American lodges had severed all relations with the Grand Lodges across the sea. In this wise the word "Ancient" came into general use, and remains today imbedded in the official titles of about half the Grand Lodges in this land.

Much mystery still hangs about the word "Accepted," but in a general way we may feel pretty safe in thinking that it refers to the fact that after the ancient builders' guilds began to break up and to lose their monopoly of the trade, they began to "accept" into their membership men who had no intention of engaging in actual building, but who sought membership for social purposes, or in order to have the advantage of the rich symbolism, the ritual and the philosophy of the Order. The first man thus admitted of whom we have a record is Boswell, who was made a Mason in 1600, as already noted, but it is fairly certain that others had been similarly accepted long before. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that non-operatives had been taken into membership from the very earliest times, and it is possible that the word was also applied to those members that devoted themselves to superintending and planning, but not to physical work. Throughout the seventeenth century the number of accepted increased until by the beginning of the eighteenth century many lodges were almost wholly made up of such members, and in 1717 the whole Craft was transformed into, a speculative science, though it is true that many operative lodges remained in existence, and some are still functioning and claiming for themselves the ancient lineage.

We shall have to wait with patience until all problems concerning these various words are cleared up, but meanwhile we can use them with a satisfactory degree of certainty as connecting us historically with a process of growth and development that began far back in the Middle Ages, or earlier, and has continued until now. Verily it has been a history filled with wonders, and even now there are few who have a full appreciation of the height and depth and length and breadth and exceeding riches of Freemasonry.

Freemasonry is an establishment founded on the benevolent intention of extending and conferring mutual happiness upon the best and truest principles of moral life and social virtue. - CALCOTT.

George Helmer FPS
PM Norwood #90 GRA
PZ Norwood #18 RAM
MBBFMN #362