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Inside the Masons

The fraternal order has long been the target of conspiracy theories and hoaxes. Here's the real story

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The 1820s looked as though they would be the best of times for the special relationship between the fraternal order of Freemasonry and the young American nation. It wasn't just because so many prominent members of the founding generation--George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and indeed 13 of the 39 signers of the Constitution--had been members. It was also because the rapidly growing republic and the fraternal society still held so many ideals in common. American republican values looked like Masonic values writ large: honorable civic-mindedness, a high regard for learning and progress, and what might be called a broad and tolerant religiosity. Indeed, says Steven Bullock, a historian at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and a leading scholar of the Masonic fraternity in America, Freemasons "helped to give the new nation a symbolic core."

Not for nothing were the compass, square, and other emblems associated with Freemasonry emblazoned everywhere, even on jewelry, furniture, and table settings belonging to Masons and many non-Masons as well. Nor was it insignificant that a goodly number of Americans thought--erroneously but justifiably--that the Great Seal of the United States itself contained Masonic symbols. It was both a tribute and a liability to the brotherhood that people saw the influence of Freemasonry even where it didn't exist.

Since the Revolution, Freemasons had become the semiofficial celebrants of American civic culture. Wearing their distinctive aprons and wielding the trowels of their craft--the original Masons were in fact stonemasons--they routinely laid the cornerstones of important government buildings and churches and participated prominently in parades and other public ceremonies. When the aging Lafayette made his return tour of the United States in 1824-25, members of the "craft" (as Masonry is called) conspicuously greeted their fellow Mason, often inviting him to stay at the local lodge. That tour further boosted Masonic membership, which had grown from 16,000 in 1800 to about 80,000 in 1822, or roughly 5 percent of America's eligible male population.

How, then, did what looked like the best of times for Freemasonry so quickly become the worst of times? Part of the answer can be found in the public's divided reaction to Lafayette's tour, suggests historian Mark Tabbert, curator of Masonic and fraternal collections at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington, Mass., in his new book, *American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities*. To many citizens, those conspicuous displays of fraternal affection for a foreign nobleman smacked of something both elitist and conspiratorial. Quite simply, Tabbert writes, they "heightened suspicion of the craft as an international order with secrets and a radical revolutionary past."

Not so secret. It was not the first time Freemasonry would meet with such a response. From its birth as an organized fraternal movement in early-18th-century London to this very day, Freemasonry has been the object of wide curiosity and occasional intense suspicion. With its elaborate secret rituals, its involvement with both ancient wisdom and modern Enlightenment science and reason, and its relatively exclusive membership (applicants must ask to join and are then vetted and voted upon), the Masonic brotherhood has proved almost tailor-made for weavers of conspiracy theories or opportunistic authors eager to make a buck by imaginatively "exposing" the secret ways and even more secret ambitions of the craft. If the "grand secret" of Freemasons, as brother Benjamin Franklin once said, "is that they have no secret at all," those who suggest otherwise--including novelist Dan Brown of *Da Vinci Code* fame in his forthcoming novel, *The Solomon Key* --have seldom gone wanting for a receptive audience.

The real history of Freemasonry is arguably more interesting than all the tales woven about it. But that history is at least in part the story of the many fanciful interpretations of the brotherhood. Indeed, the Masons' substantial accomplishments--in forming solid citizens, in forging social networks, in mending certain social divisions, in supporting philanthropic causes--are all the more remarkable in the face of past efforts to defame or even dismantle the organization.

One such effort erupted into a broad social and political movement in America less than two years after Lafayette's triumphal tour, though this effort was largely triggered by the shenanigans, or something criminally worse, of several overzealous New York members. In the summer of 1826 in the upstate town of Batavia, a disgruntled ne'er-do-well claiming to be a Mason, William Morgan, declared his intent to publish a book revealing the secrets of one of the higher-degree Masonic societies, the Royal Arch, that had earlier blackballed

his candidacy. Arrested twice on charges trumped up by local Masons, the would-be exposer was mysteriously abducted and either run out of the country or killed. Charges were brought against the likely suspects, Masons all, but after some 20 trials, writes Bullock in his book *Revolutionary Brotherhood: Freemasonry and the Transformation of the American Social Order, 1730-1840* , "only a handful of convictions resulted, all followed by minor jail terms." To a growing number of Americans already wary of the power of the craft, it looked as though Masons had gotten away with murder. And to many of those same Americans, everything that prominent evangelical ministers had been saying against Freemasons--that they were deists or believers in "natural" religion or necromantic cultists--seemed to be confirmed by this signal act of unrighteous behavior.

"Morgan committees" that originally set out to establish the truth about the crime soon became the spearhead of a statewide movement and then a national Anti-Masonic Party dedicated to driving the Masons out of existence. Pennsylvania and Vermont elected Anti-Masonic governors, and former U.S. Attorney General William Wirt ran for president on the party's ticket in 1832, winning Vermont's electoral votes and about 8 percent of the national popular vote.

The party soon disappeared as the Democratic and new Whig parties stepped up their organizational efforts to dominate the national political scene. But in addition to providing a model for future American single-issue movements, from abolitionism and temperance to today's Green Party, the anti-Masonic movement nearly drove the fraternity out of existence. New York State was home to about 500 local lodges in the mid-1820s, but only 26 lodges could muster representatives to attend the statewide grand lodge meeting in 1837. Almost two thirds of Indiana's lodges had shut down by the same year. By the end of the 1830s, Masonry was making a slow comeback, but, as Bullock writes, "it would never again recover the exalted position that had once seemed Masonry's just due."

How Masonry had come to such an exalted position in American public life, briefly to lose it before regaining a lesser mantle of respectability, is a story that begins in Scotland and England. Descended from medieval stonemason guilds, the lodges of 17th-century Britain were still dominated by actual (or "operative") masons who gradually welcomed into their ranks, often as patrons, selected gentlemen, as long as they pledged loyalty to the crown and faithfulness to God. These "accepted" members were drawn as much by the sociable character of the fraternities (which typically met in inns or taverns) as by private rituals and signs that had once helped the artisans protect secrets of their craft. Masonry's ties to ancient architecture, geometry, and other rational arts and sciences heightened its allure to men who participated in or closely followed the development of modern experimental science.

Wisdom seekers. As accepted members came to dominate the assorted lodges, many of whom were also members of Britain's scientific Royal Society, the focus of the fraternal life shifted to philosophical (or "speculative") considerations and the exploration of connections between newly discovered laws of nature and the wisdom of ancient civilizations. "They studied Greek and Roman architecture and King Solomon's Temple," writes Tabbert, "in search of keys to unlock the lost truths of ancient civilizations." Indeed, the highly mythologized genealogies of Masonry often give the temple that Solomon built in Jerusalem in 967 B.C. a prominent place in the Masonic tradition. The various architectural features of the temple, and the story of its alleged master builder, Hiram Abiff, would become central to the symbolic lore and initiatory rituals of the fraternity.

In America, Freemasonry was eagerly embraced both by the gentlemanly establishment and by members of the artisan and commercial class who aspired to that establishment. Indeed, Freemasonry encouraged social movement and a more inclusive elite through education, the cultivation of politeness and honor, mutual assistance, networking, and tolerance for differences in the delicate matter of religion. (Brothers were expected to honor "that religion in which all men agree [that is, belief in a "beneficent God"], leaving their particular opinions to themselves," wrote Scotsman James Anderson, a Presbyterian minister who in 1723 published *Constitutions of the Free-Masons,* the first official record of the Grand Lodge.)

Social climbers. Right up to the Revolution, men of character, talent, and ambition used Freemasonry to rise on the social ladder. Before his famous ride, Paul Revere was known as a prominent silversmith and Freemason. A fellow Bostonian, a free African-American and leather-shop owner named Prince Hall, shrewdly assessed the benefits of the fraternity. In 1775, he and 14 other African-Americans underwent initiation in a British military lodge. Hall and several brothers founded their own lodge during the Revolution. Prince Hall Freemasonry, as it was named after the death of Hall in 1807, spread to Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere to become a powerful crucible of African-American leadership, even while providing charity and other support to the black community. Although African-Americans can join any lodge, Prince Hall Freemasonry remains a vital--and still separate--part of American Masonic tradition.

After the Revolution, reluctantly breaking ties with the London grand lodges (Masons really did believe their fraternal ties should transcend politics), American lodges reorganized under state grand lodges. Freemasonry also began to move into the country's interior, promoting commercial and other connections between coastal cities and the ever advancing frontier.

Freemasonry in America is a story of successive reinventions, says S. Brent Morris, a scholar of Masonry and editor of the *Scottish Rite Journal*. From 1790 to 1820, younger American Masons imported two new higher-degree systems of Masonry, the York Rite, following English traditions, and the Scottish Rite, following French practices. The Scottish Rite and the York Rite encouraged more ritual instruction in morality, even while promoting some fanciful ideas about the origins of the fraternity. (Perhaps the most influential was the legend that Masons descended from the medieval Knights Templar, an order that fell out of favor with the Roman

Catholic Church before substantially disappearing in the 1300s.) The elaborate and secret new rites attracted members but also added to the suspicions of critics who already considered Masons to be elitists with far too many secrets to be trusted.

As Masonry revived in the wake of the anti-Masonic campaign, Masons cultivated a more modest style. Gone were the tavern revelry and open proposing of toasts that bothered evangelicals. The order itself "took on a more evangelical coloring," says William Moore, a historian at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington and author of the forthcoming *Masonic Temples: Freemasonry, Ritual Architecture, and Masculine Archetypes*. "The books that Masons produced," Moore notes, "looked like Sunday school manuals with illustrations that looked like engravings from Victorian Bibles." Masons also began to direct charity efforts toward the larger community and not just toward fellow Masons and their families. And partly to quiet criticism from women, Masons created the Order of the Eastern Star and other affiliates for women to join. Even today, "mainstream Masonry is male only," says Morris, although state lodges set their own rules to a degree and there are some coed groups.

After the Civil War, and as the Gilded Age got going in the early 1870s, Masons again modified their role, becoming the model to more than 300 fraternal groups that appeared during the next 50 years. During this "golden age" of fraternal orders, Freemasonry and societies like the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias provided a buffer against the dynamic, often cutthroat economy and an increasingly diverse society. Boosting their good works, including the support of schools and hospitals, Masons even found a way to blend fraternal conviviality with philanthropy, creating the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine in 1870. Open only to Freemasons who had completed York or Scottish Rite degrees, this festivity-oriented order celebrated the well-rounded personality in an age that was coming to value personality over older ideals of honor and character. Shriners learned to amuse while raising money for hospitals and ambitious Shrine temples.

Satanic hoax. Despite the fraternity's good works, myths of dark doings continued to haunt Freemasonry. In the late 1880s, a mischievous French writer and former Mason, known by his pen name Leo Taxil, set out to play on Catholic fears of the order. He claimed to expose the order's greatest secret, known only to the highest-degree Masons: that the secret religion of Masonry was the worship of Lucifer. Even after Taxil confessed to the hoax in 1897, the myth served as a staple of anti-Masonic lore, peddled in books like evangelist Pat Robertson's *New World Order*.

But Masonry's greatest challenge was not its susceptibility to use in conspiracy fantasies. For all Masons did to engage with the larger society, and despite having a membership roll in the millions, Masonry seemed less central to America of the Roaring Twenties and its Babbitt-like "joiners" than did groups like Kiwanis and Rotary, which were more openly glad-handing and had far fewer ritual demands. Yet the old fraternal order saw one more boom. After the war ended, "the Masonic fraternity realized the profits of its hard labor between the Great Depression and World War II," writes Tabbert. "The craft was more accepted and appreciated than . . . prior to 1929." Between 1945 and 1960, membership soared from 2.8 million to a peak of 4 million.

From that pinnacle, the order has slowly lost more than half its members. To more and more Americans who spend their leisure in private pursuits--including heavy TV viewing--the monthly meetings and volunteer commitments of fraternal life seem too much. But in recent years, says Morris, the rate of decline has stabilized. Historian Moore suggests a reason: "A lot of men are joining at retirement age." With the rapid graying of the U.S. population, the lodges may begin to fill with people who have more spare time than most working Americans do. And who knows? Those aging boomers might even figure out how to bring younger Americans back into the craft.

In 1882, England's *Puck* magazine depicted the Masons as apron-clad buffoons.

Masons raise a glass to their lips, drink a toast, then slam the heavy-bottomed vessel down to mimic the sound of cannons.

Every Freemason has an apron--a stylized contemporary version of the stonemason's utilitarian garb.

The Order of Odd Fellows, like the Freemasons, is a fraternal society whose members are committed to good works.

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