

Chapter 1

Lodges, Aprons, and Funny Handshakes: Freemasonry 101

In This Chapter

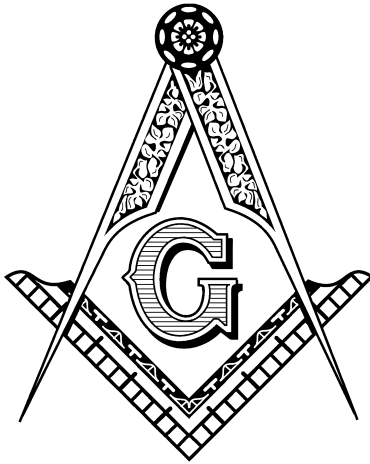
- ▶ Defining Freemasonry
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“Mystery creates wonder, and wonder is the basis of man’s desire to understand.”

—Neil Armstrong

Drive through just about any town in America, and keep your eyes open. Sooner or later, you’ll pass a building or a sign sporting a square and compass, like the one shown in Figure 1-1. It may be a large, impressive building, or a small humble one. It may be marked with a huge sign in the yard, or a simple cornerstone. But it will be there. It is a sign universally recognized throughout the world for centuries, as a symbol of truth, morality, and brotherly love. It is the square and compass of Freemasonry.

Figure 1-1:
The square and compass are the universal symbol of Freemasonry.



The greatest lure of Freemasonry is the mystique of a locked door. On the other side of that door are rituals, symbols, and ceremonies known only to its members and Masters, and unwritten secrets that have been passed from mouth to ear for centuries.

Masonic libraries are filled with books of antiquity. Science, philosophy, history, religion, and symbolism all collide in the collected works of Masonic scholars. The literature of the fraternity is strewn with legends and myths and ancient mysteries.

Voltaire, Mozart, George Washington, and Winston Churchill have all been members, along with nine signers of the Declaration of Independence and 14 U.S. presidents. The Founding Fathers of the United States embraced Masonic principles and wrote them into the foundations of U.S. government. But dictators like Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Saddam Hussein all outlawed their gatherings. Many religions forbid their members to join the Masons, and terrible accusations have been made against members of the fraternity, charging them with assassinations, conspiracies, attempts at world domination, and other evil crimes. Millions of men the world over have joined the Freemasons, yet even today, some countries threaten Masons with fines, imprisonment, or even death.

Yet, in almost every country of the world, every week, hundreds of thousands of men slip on jackets and ties; reverently fasten small, white aprons around their waists; and enter the confines of windowless lodge rooms. There they escape the outside world for a few hours and replace it with the comfort of friendship combined with ritual ceremonies from centuries ago.

What is it about this self-described fraternal and benevolent organization that evokes such opposite reactions? Is Freemasonry a mythic mass of mind-expanding, magical, mystical manifestations? An evil organization for

socioeconomic pirates? Or just a hot hand of euchre and a fish fry? In this chapter, I give you a brief overview of what Freemasonry really is, where it came from, and what Masons do.

What Is Freemasonry?

Freemasons don't always do such a good job of defining just what they are or what they do, but that's often because the answers non-Masons are looking for are really too complicated. Freemasonry (or just plain Masonry, for short) is a society of gentlemen concerned with moral and spiritual values, and one of the world's oldest and most popular fraternal organizations.

Freemasonry is perhaps the most misunderstood, yet popular, "secret society" the world has ever known. And the most visible one. Every state in the United States and almost every country in the world has a Grand Lodge of Freemasons, and each has its own Web site. Freemasons wear rings, jackets, and hats emblazoned with the square and compass on them. Their cars often have Masonic license plates and bumper stickers identifying them. Masonic buildings are clearly marked, and their addresses and phone numbers are in the Yellow Pages. Some Grand Lodges have even started advertising on billboards. If the Freemasons are a secret, they need a refresher course on camouflage.



No simple, one-line definition satisfactorily describes what Freemasonry is. It is a philosophy and a system of morality and ethics — and a pretty basic one at that — but these are the main points that make Freemasonry different from any other organization:

- ✔ Freemasonry is a fraternity of men, bound together by oaths, based on the medieval stonemason craft guilds.
- ✔ Masonic laws, rules, legends, and customs are based on the *Ancient Charges*, the rules of those craft guilds (see Appendix B).
- ✔ Freemasonry teaches lessons of social and moral virtues based on symbolism of the tools and language of the ancient building trade, using the building of a structure as a symbol for the building of character in men.
- ✔ Masons are obliged to practice brotherly love, mutual assistance, equality, secrecy, and trust between each other.
- ✔ Masons have secret methods of recognizing each other, such as handshakes, signs, and passwords.
- ✔ Masons meet in lodges that are governed by a Master and assisted by Wardens, where petitioners who are found to be morally and mentally qualified are admitted using secret ritual ceremonies based on the legends of the ancient guilds.
- ✔ Freemasonry is not a religion, and it has no religious dogma that it forces its members to accept. Masons must simply believe in the existence of a

Supreme Being, whatever they conceive that deity to be. Their personal beliefs are just that: personal.

- ✓ Freemasonry is not a science, but it does teach its members to value learning and experience. It encourages Masons to think but does not tell them *what* to think.
- ✓ Freemasonry teaches Masons to be tolerant of the beliefs of others and to regard each man as their equal, deserving both their respect and their assistance.

What Masons Do

Lodges have regular meetings throughout the year. Most meet once a month for a business meeting, where communications are read, bills are paid, new members are voted on, and the members catch up on each other's lives. Often, guest speakers are invited, or a member will give a presentation on the ritual, history, philosophy, or symbols of Freemasonry.

Other special meetings are held to initiate new members and perform the various ceremonies to advance them to full membership. And because the primary goal of Freemasonry is fraternalism, a meal is usually served before or after the meeting, either in the lodge building or at a nearby restaurant.

Modern Freemasonry started out by gathering in taverns over a nice dinner, and Masons have spent 300 years obsessing on the importance of the culinary arts. Their feasts are called *Festive Boards* (from the days when *board* meant "table"), and a tradition of many of these gatherings is a series of ceremonial toasts.

Still, the mission of the Masonic lodge is to make new Masons, and that is done by conferring degrees.

The three degrees



The ceremonies a new member must go through are called *degrees*. There are three of them — Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason — and they are based upon the levels of membership in the old medieval craft guilds. The ceremonies are based upon rituals that are centuries old — rituals that were used by those guilds.

Today, modern Freemasons have retained much of these degree ceremonies, including lots of fancy, old-fashioned language. They share these characteristics:



No one “speaks” for Freemasonry

An important thing to understand about Freemasonry is that there is no one, single, worldwide governing body for the fraternity. There are literally thousands of toney books out there with long names and respected authors who propound their theories about the history, philosophy, and symbolism of Freemasonry. And there is no shortage of convoluted-sounding titles for office holders, especially in some of the other Masonic organizations outside of the Lodge — *Grand* this, and *Supreme* that, and *Most Sovereign* something or other.

It doesn't matter. No one man speaks for Freemasonry, and no one ever has. Not even guys who write *For Dummies* books. That's important to understand whenever you hear criticisms and accusations against Freemasons,

especially when they quote “authoritative sources,” “supreme leaders,” or “unseen superiors.”

Every state in the United States, every province in Canada, and nearly every country on earth has a governing Grand Lodge — often more than one. Each Grand Lodge has rules and regulations that govern the lodges within its jurisdiction, and every Grand Lodge has a Grand Master who is essentially the president within that jurisdiction. But Grand Masters wield no power to make rules or decisions outside of their borders. There is no national or international group that controls or directs the Grand Lodges. Which makes any diabolical plan for world domination a bit tricky to coordinate.

- ✔ **The degrees are a progression and must take place in proper order.** Each builds on the previous one, and the degrees are connected by the story of the construction of Solomon's Temple.
- ✔ **Each candidate takes an *obligation* (oath) for each degree.** He promises to keep the secrets he is told, to help other Masons and their families, and to obey the rules of the fraternity.
- ✔ **Depending on the lodge, advancing from one degree to the next can take days, weeks, months, or even years.**
- ✔ **A member must prove his proficiency in his degree before moving up.** Proving proficiency is usually accomplished by memorizing a portion of the ritual and reciting it in front of the other members. Some lodges require a research paper to be presented on a certain topic, in order to prove that the candidate has studied the fraternity.

Lodges, blue lodges, craft lodges, and more

The *lodge* is the most basic unit of Freemasonry. It is a term used for the individual chapter, for a collected group of Masons who meet together, for the

room they meet in, and sometimes even for the building in which they gather. Several individual lodges can share facilities and meet at different times in the same lodge room. This is, in fact, the norm in larger cities. In smaller communities, or in the case of a very prosperous lodge, just one lodge may occupy the building.

In this book, I sometimes refer to the *blue lodge*. (I explain why it's "blue" in Chapter 7.) Other terms you'll see are *symbolic lodge*, *craft lodge*, and *Ancient Craft Masonry*. These are all various terms to describe the first, most essential starting point in the world of Freemasonry: the local, neighborhood lodge that confers the first three degrees of Masonry — the Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master Mason degrees.

Masons sometimes refer to Freemasonry as the *Craft*, because its origins are the medieval craft guilds. They most definitely are not referring to witchcraft.

Freemasonry has many different branches of membership and study. These branches or groups are called *appendant* or *concordant bodies*, and I talk a lot more about them in Part III. You may have had a relative or a friend who said he was a 32nd-degree Mason or even a 33rd-degree Mason. Those additional degrees do exist, and they're confusing, so I explain them in Part IV as well. But the truth is that there is no degree in what is referred to as *Ancient Craft Masonry* higher or more important than the three degrees a man receives in a Masonic lodge. These other degrees may have higher numbers than the first three conferred in a lodge, but they're simply different, additional ceremonies, and are in no way meant to be construed as more important or superior to becoming a Master Mason.

The public ceremonies of Freemasons

Most of the ceremonies of the Masons go on inside the confines of the lodge, but there are two special Masonic events that you may have seen in public. These public ceremonies are symbolic of beginning and ending.

Cornerstone ceremonies

Because of their heritage as builders of cathedrals and other public structures, the Freemasons have historically performed a special ceremony at the laying of cornerstones for new buildings, upon request. In modern times, these events are barely noticed by the public, but in previous centuries, the laying of a cornerstone for a new building was a very big, festive celebration. In the case of a courthouse, city hall, or other major government building, parades were often held, speeches were given, and the Freemasons would symbolically lay the cornerstone.

In the Masonic cornerstone ceremony, the stone is checked using ancient tools to be certain it is square, *plumb* (straight), and level, because a building

constructed on a poor foundation will not be strong. Next, the cornerstone is consecrated with corn (or grain), wine, and oil — all of which are Masonic symbols of prosperity, health, and peace. Finally, the stone is symbolically tapped in place with a gavel.

Funeral services

The first way many people come into contact with Freemasonry these days is at the funeral of a friend or relative who was a Freemason. Masons perform a solemn memorial service for their members, when the family requests it. The words of the ceremony provide a brief glimpse into the beliefs of the fraternity; it's a moving and deeply meaningful service. Many men, myself included, have sought membership in a lodge after seeing the funeral service performed for a loved one.

Real men wear aprons!

Yes, it's true: Grown men wearing little rectangular aprons are de rigueur fashion for the properly dressed Freemason. The aprons are symbolic of those worn by ancient stonemasons to protect their clothing and to carry their tools. Although aprons worn by many Masons are made of simple white cloth, they're traditionally supposed to be made of white lambskin, as an emblem of innocence. Some Masonic aprons are very ornate. They may be decorated to denote an officer's position, a place of honor such as a former Master of a lodge, or just simply a cool design. The Mason's apron is the first gift given to him upon his initiation into the lodge, and it is to be kept clean and spotless throughout the Mason's life as a symbol of the purity of his thoughts and actions.



Masons wear their aprons in a specific manner, according to the degree they have attained. Nobody — with the exception of an uninitiated candidate — gets into a lodge without an apron.

A “secret society”

Masons like to say that Freemasonry is not a secret society; rather, it is a society with secrets. A better way to put it is that what goes on in a lodge room during its ceremonies is private.

For a lot of years, fathers, grandfathers, and neighbors baffled young men who were interested in joining the fraternity by refusing to discuss anything about it, out of a fundamental misunderstanding about Masonic “secrecy.” They figured they weren't allowed to tell anything about it. “Join and you'll see,” was their standard answer. Fortunately, that perception is changing, and Freemasons are not so squeamish these days about talking about Masonry.

The secrets that a Mason may not discuss are the *grips* (handshakes), passwords, and *signs* (gestures) that are modes of recognition, and some details of the Masonic degree ritual ceremonies. Undoubtedly, there are still old-school Masons out there who will read something in this book and believe that I should be driven to the state line in a trunk for daring to talk about it, but they should chat with their Grand Lodge before calling to check my measurements.



Just knowing the modes of recognition won't get you into a Masonic lodge. If you're interested in becoming a Mason, don't let some big mouth in a book or on the Internet ruin the ritual experience for you by blurting out all the surprises. If you aren't interested in joining and you just want to be able to gloat about knowing some secret information, there is no shortage of books and Web sites that tell them all. You can leap into a gathering of Masons screaming "A-ha!" and blurt out a password if you like, but the *real* secret of Freemasonry has to be experienced, not explained, which is why your little stunt will be ignored.

So is it a charity? A church? A social club?

Masonry is as diverse as its members, and so it can seem like something very different depending on whom you talk to or the lodge you visit or join.



"Has he the pass?"

Freemasons who go traveling may visit Masonic lodges all over the world, but not every lodge uses the same methods of recognition. Every Grand Lodge has its own local customs and variations. American lodges issue membership cards, but outside of the United States, most lodges don't have or know about such things. A Mason may be asked many questions before being allowed in if he is not known and "vouched for" by a member of that lodge.

Making matters even more confusing is the fact that one jurisdiction may use different ritual ceremonies, different passwords, and different grips than another. When a language barrier exists, visiting a lodge can be even more

challenging. One of my Masonic brothers was traveling in the Philippines while in the Navy, when he and a friend came upon a Masonic lodge that was clearly in session. When they attempted to enter, none of the local brethren spoke English, and there were differences between the local Masonic signs of recognition. While they waited outside, they could hear a terrible commotion inside the lodge room. The door opened, and they were escorted in. What they found were all the furnishings of the lodge piled in the center of the room. To prove they were Masons, they had to put everything back in its proper location. They did, and there was much rejoicing.

Some Masons concentrate on the many charities the fraternity participates in. Some are consumed by the history or the philosophy or the symbolism of the fraternity. Others consider it to be primarily a place to go to play cards or cook a monthly breakfast, in order to be with old friends and make new ones. Still others enjoy performing the ritual ceremonies and make a lifelong passion of taking dramatic parts in it.

For men who become lodge officers or members of committees, Masonry is a personal development course, where they learn leadership skills, public speaking, and more. Men from every walk of life have the opportunity to do things in a lodge, often things that their job or their social or economic status would rarely have offered them. And then some men just like high-sounding titles, badges, ribbons, tuxedos, and spiffy accoutrements. The point is that there is something in Freemasonry for every man, whatever his interests may be.

Are [Fill in the Blank] Freemasons, Too?

Because Freemasons are an eclectic mix of men from all walks of life, other Masonic organizations have developed over the years to enlarge upon the lodge experience. They all require someone to be a member of a lodge as a third-degree Master Mason before that person can join them. They are collectively known as *appendant bodies*, and the list is almost endless.

The three major players are

- ✓ **The York Rite**, made up of three different basic groups: Royal Arch Masons, Cryptic Rite Masons, and Knights Templar.
- ✓ **The Scottish Rite**, which confers 29 degrees — the 4th through the 32nd. Additionally, members who have performed outstanding service to the Scottish Rite can be awarded the 33rd degree by the *Supreme Council*, the overall governing body of the Rite.
- ✓ **The Ancient Arabic Nobles of the Mystic Shrine**, whose members are more commonly known as Shriners. Yes, these are the guys with the funny hats and little cars. The Shrine was created in 1872 by a group of Masons who felt the lodge had become too serious and too stuffy. The Shrine confers only one degree on its Nobles, and is dedicated to putting a little bit of the boy back into the man. The Shrine also operates Shriners Hospitals, which provide free orthopedic and burn care to children.

Many more appendant bodies exist, including the Grotto, the Order of the Eastern Star (a group women may also join), Tall Cedars of Lebanon, the Order of Amaranth, the White Shrine of Jerusalem, DeMolay (for boys), Rainbow and Job's Daughters (both for girls) — the list goes on and on. All of these groups grew out of the incredible explosion of interest in fraternal organizations in the 19th-century United States and elsewhere. I go into loads of detail about all these groups in Part III.

No girlz allowed!

The modern version of Freemasonry that formed in 1717 in London was based on the ancient stonemasons' guilds. The original rules of the guilds were absolutely, 100-percent, dyed-in-the-wool, pig-headedly male only (see Appendix A). Part of the reason is that in most of Europe, women in the early 1700s had the same legal status as a minor.

Over the last three centuries, Masonry has remained a fraternity just for men, and the world's vast majority of garden-variety, mainstream Freemasons have taken an oath not to be present at, nor give their consent to, making a woman a Freemason. It isn't done. It's just not kosher. We'll get cooties.

That's the official, mainstream Masonic explanation. But the truth is always more complex. Modern Freemasonry started in Scotland and England, but it quickly spread to the European continent. As early as the 1740s, some French lodges began to initiate women as fellow members.

Over the years and almost entirely in Europe, several groups made up of lodges for both men and women (called *co-Masonry*) or for women only have started. These women did not necessarily want to barge into a lodge full of men, but they did want to enjoy the degree ceremonies, symbolism, and philosophy of Freemasonry. In England, these include the Order of Women's Free-Masons, founded in 1908; the Honourable Fraternity of Antient Free-Masons, founded in 1913; and the Order of Ancient, Free, and Accepted Masons for Men and Women, founded in 1925. France has several such groups, including Le Droit Humain, a co-Masonic group founded in 1893, and the women's Grande Loge Féminine de France, started in 1945. There are several others.

In the United States, a women's lodge existed in Boston in the 1790s, with Hannah Mather Crocker as its Worshipful Master, but it soon died out. A pseudo-Masonic order, called the Order of the Eastern Star, was created in the mid-1800s. It was carefully designed by its creators so that it did not *actually* confer Masonic degrees on women, in order to stay out of hot water with the mainstream Masons. As a result, it became an accepted member of the family of American Freemasonry, and it still functions today (see Chapter 12).

These days, the Internet is making the world a very small place, and these groups are benefiting from the worldwide and instant exchange of ideas. Female and co-Masonry is expanding in the United States and elsewhere. The American Federation of the Human Rights is headquartered in Washington, D.C., and has several co-Masonic lodges in the United States. There are other co-Masonic bodies, among them George-Washington Union and the Grand Lodge Symbolic of Memphis-Misraïm. The Women's Grand Lodge of Belgium, meanwhile, has chartered at least four lodges in New York; Washington, D.C.; and Los Angeles.

Feminine and co-Masonic groups remain pretty much ignored by the mainstream male lodges, a fact that doesn't cause these female Masons all that many sleepless nights. They know they're Freemasons, even if the boys don't agree.

Meanwhile, mainstream Freemasons are forbidden to visit or "converse Masonically" with either co-Masons or female Masons, on threat of expulsion from the fraternity. Cooties, you know.