

“The True Origin of the Craft”

Prepared remarks by Kenneth B. French delivered at the Benjamin B. French Lodge No. 15 at St. John's Festive Board on December 21, 2011.

INTRODUCTION

Good evening and welcome to the Benjamin B. French St. John's Festival. Now that I've had the pleasure of introducing everyone, it's time to talk about why we are all gathered here tonight.

For those non-Masons present, I should warn you in advance that Masons love symbols and to talk about their origin and meaning.

We are not inside a Lodge room, but in fact, there is a very old symbol found on your dinner tables.

Christmas trees, holly, wreaths of evergreens, pine cones, and poinsettias which bloom or bear their fruit this time of year are prominent symbols and signs of hope in a coming spring and renewed light.

Somewhere around 776 BC, Greeks started placing wreaths made of laurel on the heads of the athletes who came first in the Olympic Games. Very soon, important military and political leaders of the Roman Empire started wearing wreaths. It is believed that once an athlete decided to save the headgear as a souvenir of his/her victory and since then began the tradition of using wreaths as a door or wall decoration. Later, wreaths symbolized the crown of thorns put atop the head of Jesus Christ during Christmas.

Prior to Christianity, the celebration of the change of the seasons were marked with many pagan celebrations. For example, December 25 was already a major festival in the pagan Roman world.

The Dies Natalis Solis Invicti, or "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun", falling within the week-long celebration of the Saturnalia, was a feast honoring the renewal of the sun at the winter solstice.

Wreaths of evergreen symbolize signs of hope in a coming spring. A circle symbolizes eternity, that which has no beginning or end. In fact, that might be the very oldest symbol on your table.

And in many traditions, including in Masonry, evergreen branches are a symbol of eternal life, so all of the decorations tonight seem to fit in rather nicely.

This is also the time of year when Masons celebrate the return of the sun, or light conquering darkness, the triumph of good over evil. You can even notice outside that

there is no other time of year when the streets are lit up so magically. And whether you celebrate Hanukkah, Christmas, or even Diwali, there has always been something rather divine or symbolic about light.

Think about it. What was it that made Rudolf so special? It wasn't only that he could fly. (tap nose). Light. But I digress. Rudolf isn't why everyone is here tonight.

Tonight, the brethren of No. 15 are gathered in commemoration of the St. John's festival, which is a Masonic tradition that occurs only twice per year.

Both of the dates for this Festival coincide with the Summer and Winter Solstices respectively. The festival days set aside are June for Saint John the Baptist, and in December for Saint John the Evangelist.

But why did Freemasonry select the Holy Saints John as their patron saints?

According to some, adoption of these saints by Freemasonry far precedes the first Grand Lodge of 1717. Many of the Operative Lodges had been dedicated to the Baptist and a few to the Evangelist.

It may also be significant that the first Grand Lodge of England was formed at a meeting held on the Festival of Saint John the Baptist.

Thereafter London Lodges were dedicated to the two Saints John, and continued to be until 1813, since when they were instead dedicated to Solomon.

Did you know that? I didn't until about one week ago.

You see American Lodges have continued the custom brought from England in colonial times, paying no attention whatsoever to changes made by the English Lodges and continue to observe the festival of the two Saints John. Am not exactly sure why the Grand Lodge of England and the United States went our separate ways in 1813 on this rather important bit of ritual, but it is worth noting that the War of 1812 might have had something to do with it.

The American Masonic community may have missed that meeting in 1813 because the War of 1812 wasn't quite finished in 1813. In fact it was in 1814, that the British proceeded to set fire to this very city and torched the US Capitol and White House during the war.

But that was almost two centuries ago and we're all friends now. However, I do intend to talk more about fire later ... of a different variety.

For tonight's festivities, I wished to do a little further research as to why the Saints John were originally selected as the patron saints of Freemasonry.

THE HOLY SAINTS JOHN

It's been said that from the Masonic perspective we are given the balanced dualism of John the Baptist on one side and John the Evangelist on the other. Represented together this way represents the balance of passionate zeal with a learned knowledge of faith. Individually strong, together they stand as a harnessed focus of zeal and knowledge, representing a well-balanced path towards enlightenment.

St. John the Baptist was also a man who lived a simple, yet rather devout life and for his strong fidelity to his beliefs and faith, his integrity, he was also murdered because of that same passionate devotion. Sound familiar? It's no wonder St. John the Baptist was chosen as our patron saint.

St. John the Divine's gospel begins with the following words:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

See his connection to the Craft? Nowhere else in the Bible except in Genesis is the concept of light connected with the divine spirit.

However, after delving further into the matter, I began to realize that history does not tell us precisely why the Saints John were selected as the patron saints of Freemasonry. The true meaning has apparently been lost to time ... just like no one knows exactly when the Craft was first established.

Some say Freemasonry evolved from stone masons who built the cathedrals of Europe and it was a labor union with secret passwords/handshakes to prove their abilities when traveling to foreign countries.

Stone masons, Knights Templar, the Druids, the Kabala, King Solomon, and Ancient Egyptians? No one knows I suppose. Masonry is so old that Masons don't even know our own origin.

But I do have a theory.

Knowing what type of rowdy, revolutionary figures of which the Craft has historically been comprised, I believe that Festive Boards or Table Lodges like this one here tonight are where great quantities of alcohol have been consumed over the centuries.

And since we celebrate this event twice a year, instead of honoring two different Saints with two different names, I think choosing two different Saints with the same name may have just been done out of convenience.

Actually I really do have a theory about why we do it and from my research last week at

the House of the Temple, I may have stumbled onto something much deeper.

Something that may in fact shock you!

Am glad all of you are already sitting down ... and have a drink in your hand. In fact, you may need to pour another one to better prepare for all that I am about to uncover.

It may have cost you only \$20 to gain admission into this Festive Board this evening, but all of you present tonight are in for a treat.

Tonight I intend going to reveal the *true* origin of the Craft.

Ready?

THE EVOLUTION OF FREEMASONRY IN ENGLAND

In 1717, the founding of the United Grand Lodge of England occurred on St. John's Day (the Baptist).

Masonic ritual in America first came from the United Kingdom, and then it was modified in England & most of America - except for Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania - by Preston and Webb in the late 18th Century (which was later exposed in the 1820s).

Today in America, it varies from state to state and the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania now in fact performs the oldest Masonic ritual in the world because of the revisions.

However, England and America eventually also started to do things very differently, which I will get into in just a moment.

In 1723, Andersen's "Book of Constitutions" was published.

The full text of Andersen's Constitutions was reprinted as the first ever Masonic book published in America in 1734, by the 28 year old Grand Master of Pennsylvania, none other than Most Worshipful Brother Benjamin Franklin. Did you realize he was Grand Master at the tender age of 28?

"The CHARGES of a FREE-MASON

CHARGE #1. Concerning GOD and RELIGION.

...in ancient Times Masons were charg'd in every Country to be of the Religion of that Country or Nation, whatever it was, yet 'tis now thought more expedient only to oblige them to that Religion in which all Men agree, leaving their particular Opinions to themselves; that is, to be good Men and true, or Men of Honour and Honesty, by whatever Denominations or Persuasions they may be distinguish'd; whereby Masonry becomes the Center of Union, and the Means of conciliating true Friendship among Persons that must have remain'd at a perpetual Distance."

Andersen's Constitution did not want to place any denominational bar on those who were

followers of the acknowledged 'religion' of the time/place.

It was not Christianity which was discarded at this point - it was dogmatism, bigotry and intolerance.

However, to many Masons at the time in the UK (especially in Scotland & Ireland), removing overt references to Christianity was considered "sacrilegious." They didn't like this de-Christianization of the Craft.

Many Masons at the time didn't like the way ritual was being "innovated" and the way prayers and Masonic ritual or alterations of the obligations by removing Saint John were being rewritten to accommodate all men of good-will from outside of the Christian religion. This was considered by some to be "innovations" to the Craft.

Therefore, in 1751, a rival Grand Lodge was formed, "the Ancients," which kept much of the Christian symbolism initially included in the Craft.

Just as soon as ritual was formalized, it was exposed. So maybe what I'm about to reveal to all of you tonight is actual ritual, and maybe it isn't. We all know that not everything written by Dan Brown is the gospel truth (forgive the expression).

With early Masonic ritual exposes, it's always hard to know if they are 1) entirely and universally accurate, 2) accurate for one lodge (that might practice variant rituals), 3) as accurate one person's memory allows, 4) partially or completely made up to sell books. This has been known to happen even today I suppose.

However, these 18th century exposures are all Masonic scholars and historians today can really turn to for information about what was the Craft back then.

Want to hear some of it? Pay attention because what I'm about to say may even surprise some of the Masons in this room. What I'm about to share isn't just new for the ears of our non-Masonic visitors.

This is from one of those exposures called "The Grand Mystery of Free-Masons Discover'd" (1724).

Q: What Lodge are you of?

A: The Lodge of St. John

Q: How many Lights?

A: Three: a Right East, South, and West

Q: What do they represent?

A: The Three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

In 1760, "The Three Distinct Knocks" (another "Exposure") revealed a New Testament

Scripture reference for the three knocks common to every Masonic Lodge....

Q: What do these three knocks signify?

A: Three words of the evangelist, ask and it shall be given you, seek and ye shall find, knock and it shall be opened unto you. (Matthew 7:7)

"Enter in the name of God and Holy Saint John"

"This Worshipful Lodge, dedicated to the Holy Saints John"

Q: Why are our Lodges dedicated to Saint John?

A: Because the Brother Masons who united to conquer the Holy Land, chose out that Saint for their Patron.

In 1023, a hospital named after Saint John was next to the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. The hospital was of note, not only because of its location, but also because it treated pilgrims and injured soldiers from the Crusades from all sides of the conflict. Some say this Order of Hospitallers later evolved into the Knights Templar. Maybe Freemasonry is descended from the Knights Templar, but it's even disputed whether the Hospitallers bear any relation to the Knights Templar. But I digress.

The Bible was always opened on the gospel of Saint John. *"In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God."*

Q: Why is your Lodge situated East and West?

A: Because all churches and chapels are, or ought to be so.

Q: Why so brother?

A: Because the Gospel was first preached in the East and extended itself to the West.

Therefore the Master stands in the east, the Holy Bible opened at the Gospel of St. John, surrounded by three lights.

It was because *"Judas betrayed Christ for 30 pieces of silver [that] I was divested of metals that I might not have the price of blood about me."*

The East was an expression used by the Ancients to imply CHRIST.

Q: Why do you leave the West, and go to the East?

A: Because the Light of the Gospel was first shown in the East.

Back then, prayers often concluded *"in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Amen."*

You are very unlikely to ever hear a Lodge prayer concluded like that today, but why is that?

Well the man considered to be "Father of Masonic Ritual" was William Preston, a Modern, who wrote this following excerpt in the famous "Illustrations of Masonry," which apparently turned the tide in favor of de-Christianization of the Craft when it was written in 1772:

"Ever since symmetry began, and harmony displayed her charms, our Order has had a being ... Wherever arts flourish, there it flourishes too. Add to this, that by secret and inviolable signs, carefully preserved among the fraternity, it becomes a universal language. Hence, many advantages are gained: The distant Chinese, the wild Arab, and the American savage, will embrace a brother Briton ... The spirit of the fulminating priest will be tamed: and a moral brother, though of a different persuasion, engage his esteem; for mutual toleration in religious opinions is one of the most distinguishing and valuable characteristics of the Craft. As all religions teach morality, if a brother be found to act the part of a truly honest man, his private speculative opinions are left to God and himself. Thus, through the influence of Masonry, which is reconcilable to the best policy, all those disputes which embitter life, and sour the tempers of men, are avoided..."

Yet, it still took also FORTY years for the Craft to unite in England over these major differences. The "savages" in America had their disputes too.

For example, Most Worshipful Brother Benjamin Franklin did not receive Masonic honors at his funeral because the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania was aligned with the Ancients ... and he was a Modern. But you see so was Lafayette & Voltaire, and all those other French or international Masons he persuaded to come to our relief during the American Revolution. Do you honestly think Worshipful Brother George Washington was upset by the reinforcements we received from overseas?

In the meantime, other forms of Masonry with intense Christianity could be found in the Royal Arch, the Order of Saint Andrew, Scandinavia, Germany and France (for a while anyway).

THE DUKE OF SUSSEX

In 1813, the Duke of Sussex, His Royal Highness Prince Augustus Frederick (son of King George III, who we rebelled against) became Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, the Moderns. He was a prince.

For him, the reconciliation with the Ancients and a more inclusive form of Freemasonry was of paramount importance.

During the Napoleonic wars, he was apparently rather moved by watching hundreds of Jewish soldiers take an oath in service to the King on the Book of Leviticus before going into battle. It is said the influence of Deism also shaped his outlook.

The new Grand Master was also very important influence on easing tensions in England with Catholics. Roman Catholics were not entirely free in England until 1829 when the Duke of Sussex exerted himself in their cause.

He wanted the ethical and moral basis of strict honor and integrity to be maintained, but to also admit members of other religious groups. A man of tolerance, yet not a lover of dogma.

So they revised the ritual to remove nearly every Christian allusion in favor of universality. However, the most controversial revision was the substitution of Moses and Solomon for the two Saints John as the two great parallels of Freemasonry.

In 1717, at the time of Saint John's Feast, Freemasonry began and the Craft became less denominational.

In December 1813, at the time of Saint Johns Feast, the Ancients' Grand Lodge ended, and the Craft became more universal.

CONCLUSION

So in conclusion of what was not supposed to be such a lengthy presentation (Sorry, Worshipful Master), I am starting to believe Freemasonry is descended from Christian stone masons who built Cathedrals. The early Masons were not building mosques or synagogues. This could be the true origin of the Craft, but in reality it is just a theory I've come up with only in only the past week.

Freemasons back then were of the operative type and what it has become today is obviously quite different. We are still builders, but it is important to note for all of our non-Masonic visitors that Freemasonry is neither a religion nor a substitute for religion. The Craft teaches the universal truths found in all religions.

And for our Masonic visitors who have never before visited No. 15, many are surprised to see when they visit this Lodge for the first time, just how many volumes of sacred law are found at our altar.

Freemasonry has now been made acceptable to persons of every denomination, race and nationality all over the world. In fact, you can now see the entire world in this very room and particular collection of Masons.

And many visitors from outside this jurisdiction are always surprised by the diversity of our Craft in the District of Columbia. Masons of DC represent many faiths and nationalities, and in fact that is what first impressed me about this Lodge and the Craft.

But I already knew that about this Lodge before I ever joined.

I love the Craft and the universal principles on which it was founded.

Yet before researching tonight's presentation, what I did not know until very recently was how the Craft evolved over time and came to be what it is today.

I will admit to being astonished by the major differences between Freemasonry as it is practiced in America, and in the UK. I only discovered this difference by accident, but I can't also help but think about how similarly practiced and universal it is today in both places (at least here in Washington, DC).

Am sure the influence of our founding fathers in this country, men like George Washington, Ben Franklin, and the American constitution/First Amendment have impacted the evolution of society, over there in England, as well as the world.

Being from Maryland, I am aware that the state got its nickname "The Free State" from the fact that Catholic's were free to practice their religion. Charles Carroll was a Catholic, and from what I was told by Worshipful Brother Gibala before ever joining this Lodge, also a Freemason who signed the Declaration of Independence. His brother, John Carroll, was also the very first Roman Catholic Bishop and Arch-Bishop in the United States. In fact, he also founded Georgetown University, the oldest Catholic university in this country.

Americans broke free from the Monarchy in 1776. And I can't help but think our founders had at least a little tiny influence on causing His Royal Highness to change Freemasonry in England ... and Masonry has now evolved into what it is today all over the world.

Anyway, like I said, this is all just a theory I came up with last week. Perhaps I am wrong. There is only one perfect ashlar in this building and it isn't me. But prove me, disprove me if you can.