



Approaching The Portals
(General Information Concerning Masonry)



***GRAND LODGE A. F. & A. M. OF
NORTH DAKOTA***

Welcome To Masonry...

You have made an important step, one which we are sure you will value not only now, but for many years to come. Masonry is an unique institution that has been a major part of community life in America for over 250 years. Masonry, or more properly Freemasonry, is America's largest and oldest fraternity...and one that continues to be an important part of many men's personal lives and growth. Your decision to enter the ranks of Freemasonry, and join with thousands of other members in North Dakota, and around the world has to be your own decision without the undue influence of others. That simple fact makes your membership in Masonry one of your choice. And that's important. Men join Masonry for a variety of reasons. Each is valid and important. And Masonry is large enough, and diversified enough, to provide what you are looking for.

- ◆ Masonry is a social organization.
- ◆ It has many and important charitable projects.
- ◆ Freemasonry is rich in history, both as an institution, and as an organization that has had a worldwide impact on history.
- ◆ It is a proven way to develop both your public speaking and dramatic abilities. Through workshops and individual lodge meetings and opportunities, it provides an effective avenue for member's leadership potential.
- ◆ Masonry has within it a basic philosophy of life that places the individual worth of each man high on its pedestal, and incorporates the great teachings of many ages to provide a way for individual study and thought.
- ◆ It has a great respect for religion, and at the same time, promotes toleration and equal esteem for the religious opinions and beliefs of others.
- ◆ It provides a real working plan for making good men even better.

In short, Masonry is what you make of it for yourself.

What Is Masonry?

What is modern Freemasonry? Masonry, as mentioned before, is many things to many people. It might be defined, as it was many years ago in England as "a system of morality,,, veiled in allegory (or a story) and illustrated by symbols." It is a course of moral instruction which uses both allegories and symbols to teach its lessons. The legends and myths of the old stonecutters and masons, many of them involved in building the great cathedrals of Europe, have been woven into an interesting and effective way to portray moral truths.

In Masonry, the old tools and ways of the mason craftsmen are used to help dramatically portray those truths. For example, in the first, or Entered Apprentice degree the main symbols are the 24 inch rule and common gavel. Just as the ruler is used to measure distance, the modern Mason uses it as a symbol or a reminder to manage one of his most precious resources, Time. And as the gavel is used to shape stones, so is it also the symbol for the necessity of all of us to work to perfect ourselves.

The modern definition is "Freemasonry is an organized society of men, symbolically applying the principle of Operative Masonry and architecture to the science and art of character building." In other words, Masonry uses ageless methods and lessons to make each of us a better person.

What is the purpose of Masonry?

Simply put, the overall purpose of Masonry is to provide a way to help each member become a better person.

We try to place emphasis on the individual man by:

1. Strengthening his character,
2. Improving his moral and spiritual outlook.
3. Broadening his mental horizons.

We try to impress upon the minds of our members the principles of personal responsibility and righteousness; to give each member an understanding of and feeling for Freemasonry's character; and we would like to have every member put these lessons into practice in his daily life. We try to build a better world by building better men to work in their own communities. Freemasonry believes in universal peace made possible by teaching its doctrine through the Brotherhood Of Man and the Fatherhood Of God.

Origin of Freemasonry

We are not sure at what point in time our craft was born. We do know it goes far beyond written record, and we believe it was not always called Freemasonry.

Some of the ancient mysteries of Egypt, Greece, and the Orient influenced the ceremonies used today. These ceremonies were designed to test men, and to admit only those who were worthy.

Our ceremonies are somewhat the same, only less physical in nature, and more spiritual in form.

Over the ages Freemasonry, as we know it, slowly took form. It has evolved into a comprehensive, and effective form of fraternal teaching of basic morals, truths, and personal fulfillment. It ranks the development of the individual's reasoning capabilities highly and encourages the questioning mind.

The History of Masonry In North Dakota

Throughout the history of world civilization has moved from east to west, and for centuries Masonry has moved forward with the pioneers and found its place in the forefront of progress everywhere.

So it has been in North Dakota. Without question, the most important event in the early history of this area was the Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1804, 1805, and 1806, from St. Louis Mississippi, to the Pacific coast and back, via the Missouri and Columbia Rivers.

The significance of that memorable expedition, insofar as North Dakota Masonry is concerned, centers around the fact that Captain Meriwether Lewis as a member of St. Louis Lodge No. 111, of St. Louis, Missouri, at the time he entered the present boundaries of North Dakota, and so far as is known, he was the first Master Mason to tread upon our soil.

More than half a century passed, after the boats of the Lewis and Clark Expedition made their way down the Missouri River on August 06, 1806, before Masonry was again brought to light insofar as recorded history has revealed.

On July 21, 1875 a Masonic convention was called in the hall of Incense Lodge No. 257, at Vermillion to install the Grand Lodge Officers of the Grand Lodge of Dakota. With Statehood assured in 1889 no time was lost and the Grand Lodge of Dakota ceased to be at Mitchell on June 12-13, 1889 with the organization of the Grand Lodges of North and South Dakota.

Since those early days in 1889 the Grand Lodge of North Dakota has grown from those first 31 lodges to more than 100 lodges and with the help and hard work of YOU, the reader of this history, we will continue to grow and prosper and continue with our ongoing work of "making good men better".

The Two Types of Masonry

There are two types of Masonry. One we call "Operative" and the other we call "Speculative".

Operative Masonry can be traced back to the Middle Ages and beyond. Operative Masons, back then, formed groups with structures similar to ours today. They had officers and stations just like ours. Other men were admitted only after they had served a number of years of apprenticeship. This is the origin of the first or Entered Apprentice .

Operative Masonry refers to the time in our history where Masons actually did the physical labor of building. They were the best at their craft, and they kept secret their methods of building. Speculative Masonry refers to the period of time when men were accepted into the Craft without being physical builders, that is, they were spiritual builders. Speculative Masonry adopts the terms and concepts of the actual improvement rather than the actual construction of buildings.

Origin of The Grand Lodge

Modern Speculative Masonry, as we know it today, owes its structure to the Grand Lodge. The first Grand Lodge, under our present system of Speculative Masonry, was organized in London in 1717 and is known as the United Grand Lodge of England. With the exception of a few Lodges, every modern regular Masonic Lodge was granted a charter or warrant from a Grand Lodge. Every Grand Lodge has a certain jurisdiction or an area to cover. In the United States every State is governed by a Grand Lodge.

Titles of Grand Lodges in the United States also vary. Some, like the Grand Lodge of Masons in North Dakota are called A. F. & A. M., which means Ancient Free and Accepted Masons. The most commonly used title is F. & A. M., or Free and Accepted Masons. The reason for this difference is that in England, when Grand Lodges first started, there was a rivalry between the Irish faction and the English faction much like there is, today. One faction adopted the Ancient title and the other did not. This carried over to the United States, and we still have both titles in existence.

Free and Accepted Masons

How did the words "Free" and "Accepted" originate?

The ancient craftsmen were very skilled and their craft was considered to be indispensable to the welfare of both "Church" and "State". They were the men who built castle and church. For this reason, they were not placed under the same restrictions as were other workers. They were "free" to do their work, travel, and live their lives in a manner which was in line with their importance.

The Masons organized into "guilds", something like a trade union, and individual companies or groups of Masons contracted for specific construction projects. In the England of that time, this type of behavior was unusual. Most workers were under bond to the owners of the land on which they worked.

Freedom for the Operative Mason appears to date back to the year 946, in York, England.

The word "accepted" also goes back to the time of the Operative Mason. During the later years of the Middle Ages, there were few educated outside the monasteries of the church. Some wanted to become Freemasons and receive the advantages the craft had to offer. These men did not necessarily want to build buildings; they wanted to belong to the organization. These were "Accepted" Masons, rather than Operative Masons, and included many of the merchant class. This practice probably originated when some of the people for whom craftsmen were working, asked to be admitted; and the practice grew with them.

By the late 1600's the demands for the type of architecture that lent itself to the guild type of operation was declining. Architecture itself was changing; and the number of men, as well as the number of operative lodges, was declining. More and more Masonry shed its image of a workers guild, and adopted the legends and habits of the old operative lodges, but for spiritual and moral purposes. At the same time of the change to "speculative" masonry, the concept grew rapidly. As time went on, there became many more "accepted" members than there were operative members. Sometime in the eighteenth century, we believe the "Accepted Masons" outnumbered the "Operative Masons" and Masonry became exclusively a speculative organization rather than an operative one.

Is Freemasonry a Secret Society?

The answer is "NO"!

A secret society is generally one that wraps itself in a cloak of absolute secrecy. That means no one knows who the members are, where they meet, what they do and what they stand for.

That is not Masonry at all! Masonry may have "secrets", but it is not a secret society. Masonic secrets are few in number, and deal with the general method of initiation, the ways we recognize each other, and very little else. These parts of the ritual, which are called the esoteric side of Masonry, have been handed down by word of mouth for centuries.

Masonry's purposes, ideals, and principles may be learned by anyone who inquires. There are numerous books on these subjects which are available to the public. Masonry often has public notices in the newspapers, and our members are usually numbered among the more prominent citizens in the community.

A common principle among Masons is to answer questions about Masonry forthrightly and honestly, but generally to not officially respond to any criticism that might be levied against it.

Is Freemasonry A Religion?

The answer is NO!

Masonry, as an organization is understanding and tolerant of all religious thoughts.

Masonry has no specific creed, no dogma, no priesthood. There are no requirements as to religious preference in becoming a Mason.

Masonry does ask you to state your belief and trust in a Supreme Being. Prayers are a common part of our ceremonies, but are not offered to a specific deity.

Masonic ritual does incorporate lessons and examples from the Bible, but they are given as representative illustrations.

Masonry does not require you to belong to a church although many Masons are very active in their churches, and among our members are pastors of many denominations.

Freemasonry accepts your right to belong to any Church of your choice and does not want to infringe on that right. Neither does Masonry try to be a substitute for your church. Masonry wants to unite men for the purpose of brotherhood; not as an organized religion.

Atheism or Communism And Masonry

Belief in a Supreme Being is an unchangeable requirement in becoming a Mason, therefore no atheist can become a Mason.

Communism denies the very existence of God, therefore, no Communist can become a Mason. For many years it was thought that even in Communist countries there were Masons and that they met secretly. The continuing decline of the Communist form of government has shown that to be true.

What We Do Not Do

Secular religion and partisan politics should not be discussed in Lodge, and there are very good reasons why not. When we meet in a Lodge, we are all on a common level, and are not subject to the classes and distinctions of the outside world. Each Brother is entitled to his own beliefs and may follow his own convictions. Our objective is to unite men, not divide them. These two subjects can cause honest differences of opinion which might well cause friction among Brothers.

There will be subjects concerning the Lodge's business that have to be discussed. These discussions should be kept within the bounds of propriety, and everyone should show tolerance for the opinion of the other. Every Master wants harmony in his Lodge; and once a matter has been put to a vote in the Lodge, and a decision made, the decision should be accepted by all members regardless of how they voted.

Masonry teaches every mason to be a good citizen and to perform his civic duties. We do not try to keep anyone from expressing his opinion, or from serving his city, county, state, or nation in an honorable manner. Anyone who serves in political office should not act politically as a Freemason; nor, in the name of Freemasonry in exercising his rights.

What Masonry Stands For

Masonry has some principles which it feels are very important.

In the United States it is a strong supporter of constitutional government... of quality public education... of the freedom of religion and expression... of the equality of all men and women... of the need for strong moral character... and of meaningful charity.

Masonry, and the organizations that are within the Masonic family, contribute millions of dollars every year to helping those with sight problems or aphasia. Others help physically disabled children, and those with severe burns. Local Lodges work to help their communities and individuals within those communities.

Masonry's charity is always given without regard to race, sex, or color.

Qualification of A Petitioner

In asking to be initiated into Masonry, there are a few requirements. First, the candidate must be a man. Although the Masonic family has several organizations for women and young people, the Masonic Lodge itself has remained a man's organization.

Second, he must believe in a Supreme Being.

Third, in North Dakota, he must be of legal age (18 years of age in North Dakota). There are no physical requirements so long as the candidate can communicate enough to receive and understand the degrees. The candidate must request membership of his own free will, without undue pressure being placed upon him.

Because Masonry both requires and fosters a strong sense of brotherhood, it is a long-standing tradition that all new candidates must be elected by unanimous ballot.

Other Masonic Organizations

You have asked to join the Masonic Lodge, or Blue Lodge. It is the base of all Masonic organizations, one of more of which you may want to join sometime in the future.

Although we are not sure where the name "Blue Lodge" originated. We think it is because blue is generally regarded as the color used to characterize friendship. Finally, blue has been used to trim and decorate Masonic aprons, collars, and clothing for centuries and this is probably why it is called the "Blue Lodge".

Two of the organizations, the York Rite and the Scottish Rite, expand on the teachings of the Blue Lodge, or basic Masonry, and further explain the values of Masonry.

Another group, commonly called Shriners, is not formally connected with Masonry, but has, as its own requirement, the restriction of its membership to Masons. This organization is socially-oriented, and has as its major project the funding and operation of nearly two dozen hospitals for crippled and burned children.

The Order Of Eastern Star and the White Shrine Of Jerusalem admit both men and women.

There are several Organizations, DeMolay, Rainbow Girls and Job's Daughters for young people.

What To Expect

First of all, relax.

All of the ceremonies of Masonry are very serious and performed in a dignified manner. There is no horseplay, no hazing. You will not be compared to other members or candidates.

Enter the Lodge with a attitude which will help you appreciate the serious and solemn ceremonies that you will receive.

The degrees, or teaching lessons, are done in the form of short plays, in which you play a part, prompted by a conductor. The language and methods in which the degrees are portrayed are very old. The language is beautiful and the content both meaningful and interesting.

When you receive a degree it is suggested that you dress as if you were attending church. When you arrive at the lodge for your degree you will be asked to wait a short time in an outer room while the lodge prepares to conduct the degrees. A small committee will meet with you formally. You will be asked a set of questions, then prepared to receive the degree by temporarily exchanging your street clothes for the plain garment of a candidate.

The degree itself will be recited to you, usually from memory, by a team of Masons. Listen to the contents of what is being said. These are spiritual lessons given with great dignity.

You should have no worries about entering a Masonic lodge. The degrees are simply lessons and you will be treated as the friend and brother that you are.

The Proficiency

As you take each degree, you will be asked to show that you understand what has been said and portrayed. This step is called "the proficiency". The proficiency is a symbol that the candidate is qualified for advancement, just as in the days of operative masonry, when the worker had to show that he was qualified to do more complicated tasks.

In past times, candidates were asked to memorize a section of the lecture that accompanied the degree. Now, Masonry in North Dakota asks you to memorize the obligation of each degree, be able to demonstrate the "Modes Of Recognition", and that you pass a written test of the basic elements of Masonry and the degree work. These tests are simple, but require some study. A coach will be assigned to help you learn the material and to answer any questions you may have. You are expected to meet with your coach as often as you need to acquire a basic knowledge of Masonry.

A booklet similar to this one will be given you at the end of each degree. It will contain an explanation of the degree and will explain the symbols and actions in each part of the degree, and will also contain the questions you will be asked on the written, open book test that is required before you can advance to the next degree. This test will be given to you privately, and when you feel comfortable with the material, notify your coach you are ready to be tested.

When you pass these tests satisfactorily, you will be allowed to advance to the next degree.