

The Degree  
of  
Royal Arch Mason



Issued by the

Educational Research Committee

Of the

GRAND CHAPTER OF ROYAL ARCH MASONS OF MINNESOTA

# **THE DEGREE OF ROYAL ARCH MASON**

## **- HISTORICAL -**

In spite of the prominence of the Royal Arch degree at present, there are many matters concerning its beginnings which are obscure; one of these is the very name of the degree. Some have thought the idea of the “arch” referred to the imaginary arch made in the heavens by the course of the sun; some have thought of the term as having its early meaning of “chief” or “eminent,” as when used in the prefixes of such words as architect, archenemy, archbishop, etc.: according to this view an Arch Mason was simply an eminent or outstanding Mason. Still another view seems to fit in better with the general point of view of the fraternity, and at the same time to be simpler. The whole plan is that of a building, and the arch and its keystone complete the building. Anderson, as the frontispiece to his Constitutions of 1723, shows an arch with its keystone among other Masonic symbols, and in the book, itself he likens Masonry to a “well-built arch.” The earliest known printed reference is in the Dublin Journal of January 10-14, 1743. In the account of a parade held in connection with a St. John’s Day celebration of the “Lodge in Youghall, No. 21” there is mention of the “Royal Arch carried by two excellent Masons.” Of course this may not imply the conferral of the Royal Arch degree, but it does show some connection between the Royal Arch and symbolic or lodge Masonry at that time.

Another possible source for the name of the degree is at least worthy of consideration. Some have traced the origins of the degree at least in part to French sources. The French word “arche” means either “ark” or “arch”; the former may have been the earlier interpretation, for in an early “Abstract of Laws and Regulations for the Society of Royal Arch Masons,” published in London in 1782, the title page bore a picture of Noah’s Ark, with the motto “Nulla salus extra.” Let us also

note the fact that several additional degrees, such as “Ark Mariner,” and “Ark and Dove,” and “Ark, Mark and Link,” were early days appended to the Royal Arch degree, and that on an old seal of the degree appear the emblems of the ark, rainbow and dove. So the degree may well have been in early days that of the Royal Ark rather than that of the Royal Arch. It would be a very easy thing for the French “Arche” to be interpreted by the English word “Arch” when the degree gained popularity in England, and this may have been the cause for the prominence of the Keystone, when later workers arranged it in its modern form.

When the first Grand Lodge was organized at the time of the “Revival” of Masonry in England in 1717, there seem to have been only two degrees, though the third degree was probably instituted as a separate unit within the next few years, and it may have taken various forms in different places. From certain evidence which has been uncovered, it appears that the idea of the finding and revealing of the “lost word” was at least in some places, a part of the ceremony. By a gradual process, which is not entirely clear at present, the third or Master Mason degree came to include only the losing of the “Master’s Word,” while the finding or rediscovery of it was taken up in an additional degree, which became the ancestor of our present degree of Royal Arch Mason. It was not at first thought of as a “higher” degree, but as the last and natural step in the candidate’s progress in symbolic craft Masonry. When the two dissenting Grand Lodges of England, the “Ancients” and the “Moderns,” united in 1813 to form the present United Grand Lodge, one of the articles of agreement of this union stated:

“It is declared and pronounced that pure Ancient Masonry consists of three degrees, and no more; viz: those of the E.A., the F.C., and the M.M., including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch.” (1813). In the meantime, however, “Chapters” were being added to lodges, (the first use of the term for a body conferring the Royal Arch degree in England seem to have been at York, in 1768), and Grand Chapters had

been organized, those of the rival Grand Lodges uniting in 1817, four years after the union of the Grand Lodges themselves.

The Royal Arch degree came to America very soon after its rise in England. Although the earliest reference to it in England date from about 1740, the first actual record of the conferring of the degree comes not from England, but from the lodge of Fredericksburg, Virginia, the Lodge in which George Washington received his Masonic degrees. The Minutes of this Lodge state that on December 22, 1753, three brethren were raised to the degree of Royal Arch Mason. This was also taking place elsewhere, but even while the Royal Arch was becoming recognized as a separate degree it was worked in a Lodge, under a Lodge charter, and under the authority of the Grand Lodge. Gradually, "Chapters" were organized under the protection and the charters of Lodges, and in 1795 the Chapters of three Lodges in Philadelphia attempted to form a Grand Royal Arch Chapter. At first the effort failed, but later in the same year the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania established a Grand Royal Arch Chapter "under the immediate sanction of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania." So, although this was the first body to take the name of "Grand Chapter," it was not an independent body, but a subordinate of the Grand Lodge. All officers of the Grand Lodge, past and present, who had received the Royal Arch degree, were members of the Grand Chapter, and the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge was the "High Priest" of the Chapter.

The history of Royal Arch Masonry as a separate body in the United States dates from the organization of the Grand Chapter of the Northern States of America; a group of committees from several Chapters met in Boston on October 24, 1797, and issued the call for a convention, which met in Hartford, Connecticut, on January 24, 1798, and did the actual organizing, adopting a constitution and electing officers, of whom Ephraim Kirby, of Litchfield, Connecticut, was Grand High Priest, and Thomas Smith Webb of Albany, New York, Grand Scribe. Later the group of Chapters organizing in each state became known as a Grand Chapter (originally a "Deputy Grand Chapter"), and

the parent body became known as the General Grand Chapter of the United States of America. It now includes the Grand Chapters of all the states, except Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Texas, and its scope has been broadened by the inclusion of the Grand Chapters of the Canadian provinces of Manitoba, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Certain Chapters outside the limits of the continental United States and Canada are directly subordinate to the General Grand Chapter of the U.S.A.

## - SYMBOLS –

The symbolism of the Royal Arch degree is so rich and varied that a complete discussion would be impossible in any brief space. Only the most prominent and instructive of the symbols will be considered here. In his progress through the degree the candidate makes certain important discoveries. Of the first two of these enough already been said, in connection with the preceding degrees, but a few remarks regarding the third may be in order to clear up any confusion which might arise.

The work “Ark” is used Masonically in three distinct senses. The ark built by Noah, as a way of escape from the great flood, has appeared as an emblem in the third degree, symbolizing that security which is the result of a well spent life; only incidental reference is made to it in our present degree, by the mention of the “grand old patriarch” himself and the mountain upon which the ark rested, in the Principal Sojourner’s lecture, and by the later introduction of the names of Noah’s sons. The second ark mentioned in Scripture, and in this degree, was the treasure chest constructed by Moses, Aholiab an Bezaleel during the wilderness period; it was a strong box of acacia wood, nearly four feet in length, and about two feet in breadth and height, overlaid within and without with gold, with golden rings at its corners through which strong rods might be passed for carrying it; the cover was also of gold, and on it were two “cherubim,” winged creatures of beaten gold, between which was the “mercy seat,” where the presence of God rested. In this chest were placed, as mementoes of the providence of God during the

migration of the Hebrew people to Palestine, a pot of manna, Aaron's rod, and the original tables on which the Ten Commandments were written; a copy of certain of the earliest Scriptures seems also to have been added. This ark, with its contents, was placed first in the "tabernacle" and later in Solomon's Temple, and there, in the Holy of Holies, it remained until the Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians (or Chaldeans) in 586 B.C. Whether it was destroyed at that time, or simply disappeared from historic view, we cannot say with certainty. The latter, or substitute ark, which appears so prominently in this degree, has been a matter of much controversy, and many of the stories and legends concerning it are hard to reconcile with one another. Many scholars of biblical times and of Hebrew history have asserted that there was no ark in the Temple built by Zerubbabel. Some have handed down the story that an ark somewhat similar to the original one, with duplicates of the original contents, was placed in the new Temple. Others claim one of the kings, possibly Josiah, in a vault beneath the Temple, was thus providentially preserved for posterity. In view of these possibilities, the individual interpreter of the Royal Arch degree may draw his own conclusions.

The "living arch" appears both at the beginning and at the end of the degree. The candidate at his entrance is taught by it a lesson in humility at the attempting of any important undertaking, and at the end the living arch, with the significant equilateral triangle thrice repeated each time the arch is formed, furnishes the only situation in which the principal secret of the degree may be communicated. The arch of capitular Masonry is not a dead construction of brick or stone; it is first, last and always a "living arch," of which every Chapter Mason is a vital part. And of this he is, or should be, reminded at the opening of every Chapter session, whether for business or for the conferring of the most sublime degree.

The veils through which the candidate must pass symbolize the difficulties and limitations of human life, which too often keeps us from entering the presence of the Grand Council, and from engaging in the highest tasks of life. And how are we to pass the veils? Not just by recounting miracle stories from long ago, though these did symbolize the power and providence of God in the life of his chosen people, but by one of the titles of God Himself, and the names of those who built the arks mentioned above, and the second Temple, for the worship of this same God. Too often the passwords are given, and the significance of them entirely overlooked. The figures on the banners of the four Masters of the Veils, the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle, have been variously interpreted. They have been connected with tribes of Israel, with signs of the Zodiac, with the four Gospels and their writers. Let us note in passing, that whatever may have been the allusions of these symbols at various times, strength, patience, intelligence, and swiftness are not only attributes of God, but of those who would serve Him well.

The working tools of this degree may seem heavier and cruder than those of previous degrees, and truly they are, for the candidate is doing heavier work. He is clearing away rubbish, removing the ruins of the old Temple, and searching among them for anything which may be of value, preparatory to laying the foundation of the new. And so, the Temple of a man's life, which he has previously built, may be ruined by the enemies which have invaded it, and the broken arches and columns which remain may not be fit to be made even a part of the new building. He must begin all over and his first task may be to remove the ruins of the past. The passions and prejudices which encumber his progress must be lifted from his mind, he must loosen the hold which bad habits have had upon him, and remove any rubbish, whether of actual vice, or of simple ignorance, which may prevent him from discovering the eternal foundation of truth and wisdom upon which his new life may be built.

The apron of a Royal Arch Mason, presented to the candidate at the close of the degree, is richly symbolic. To the pure intentions, as represented by the white apron of the first three degrees, is now added the red of fervency and zeal, which are so necessary, not only for building our own lives, but in service of others as well. The Triple Tau, a sacred emblem found in various lands of antiquity, designates its wearer as set apart to the name of God, and when combined, as here, with the equilateral triangle and the circle, which are also emblematic of God's attributes, and our relation to Him, it is given still greater dignity and meaning. The further we go in Masonry, the less we can escape from God.

## **SOME GENERAL TEACHINGS OF THE ROYAL ARCH DEGREE**

One of the principal features of this degree, and perhaps the one most calculated to impress the candidate is a long and arduous journey, emblematic of the journey of life. This is not just the journey of any life, and surely not of the life of ease or self-indulgence, but of the good and useful life, the life of service to which we are all pledged by our Masonic obligations. The ambition of such a life is the high and noble one of seeking to help in the rebuilding of the fallen Temple of humanity, and the erection of the new Jerusalem, the true City of God. "Every victory we win over temptation to wrong, every time we set a brother's feet on the right path, every time we do an act of sweet charity, we take a step in our journey, we lay a stone in the rising walls of the Second Temple of our moral life." The goal is a noble and worthy one, but the way is rough and rugged. There are obstacles to be passed,



chasms to be crossed by bridges that are frail, rivers to be forded, veils to be passed only by those who have earned the right to pass them. Even the way of the good man is hard at times; the course of benevolence and well-doing is not a smooth or easy road; patience and perseverance are needed, as well as other virtues symbolized in the ritual of the degree. Humanity is taught the candidate at his entrance and reference at the very beginning of his journey, for the place of God's revelation of Himself has always been "holy ground"; prudently he must choose at a parting of the ways; faith and trust, supported by prayer, are necessary at critical points. And last of all, the motives of the traveler who would build the Temple and the city must be sincere and unselfish, "without the hope of fee or reward"; he must be willing to undertake any part of the necessary work, even the most humble. Only by such a modest and self-forgetting will to labor on the great task does he prove his merit, when he appears before the Grand Council, at the end of his toilsome journey.

The mention of God, under various names and titles, occurs often in Masonic degrees, and the candidate is taught reverence and veneration not only for the words which stand for God, but for the holy book which contains the historic revelations of his will for us, for the day on which He is worshipped, for holy objects and places, in short for "all that whereby God maketh himself know" to man. And it is not surprising that the motto of this coving degree of the capitular system should be "Holiness to the Lord." Here the candidate is brought into closer contact than before with certain names of God, especially with the covenant name or title revealed to Moses at the burning bush "I am that I am," or as we may render this difficult Hebrew phrase, "the eternal existing One." "The Everlasting." In the ancient days when men believed in many Gods, local and transient, this was a great spiritual discovery, in short a revelation from the Eternal Himself. On this basic belief in one unchanging and dependable God the religion of the Hebrews was founded, in later days the Christian faith, and in still later days the Mohammedan. It is well for the modern Mason, in changing times, and

amid a welter of differing religious faiths, to be strongly reminded anew of this basic foundation of all monotheistic religion, and that he should again be urged to reverence the great and sacred name of a Being “without beginning of days or end of years.” The Grand Royal Arch Word, which is also conferred, and which is used at the openings of Chapter meetings, is of course not the original word, but a combination of syllables from three languages, all having originally sacred significance in their respective lands. It was introduced rather late in Masonry, even in capitular history, and has, when taken as a whole, no ancient authority whatever. Its ingenious, though rather artificial derivation, has given it a certain prestige among the craft, and when its parts are carefully explained, as they should be whenever the Royal Arch degree is conferred, it may take on rich meaning, suggesting the broad and inclusive basis of our time-honored institution.

The circle of symbolism of capitular Freemasonry is now complete. The candidate has viewed the unfinished first Temple, and has entered upon his labors as an Apprentice; he has learned in the middle chamber important lessons of development and reward; he has earned his rank as a master builder by his preparation in a dramatic episode exemplifying faithfulness and fortitude; as a Mark Master he has learned thoroughness in labor, and the duty of help for a needy brother; he has felt weight and learned the problems of responsibility; he has been privileged to see the completion of the Temple, and to have a share in the dedication of the Temple, and to have a share in the dedication to God of the glorious result of his labors; and now, when evil has come in and destroyed the work, he has willingly journeyed and toiled to build a second, and eternal Temple, whose glory shall be greater than that of the former. Surely the meaning of it should not be lost. The pleasures of friendship and of social life in fraternal circles are of great value, but they must never obscure the deeper meanings, and the values without which none of the friendship or social joys would be worthwhile, or even possible.

Let us urge every Companion of the Chapter to attendance, activity, and to that constant search for “more light in Masonry,” which has been symbolically presented as his attitude throughout the progress of the degrees. These ceremonies have not been invented in a day, but have been the product of devoted thought and insight through many generations; and their full significance cannot be understood in the few brief hours needed for the receiving of the degrees. The real meaning of the words and acts involved grows upon us as we repeatedly witness the degrees and participate in them. We need well-informed Masons, who have gained real insight into our ceremonies and who are constantly sharing with one another the truths and values received. And such men are best fitted to “practice all those duties out of the Chapter which are inculcated in it.”

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