

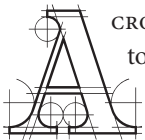
# *Presenting Freemasonry through a Public History Exhibition*

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## *To Build and Sustain: Freemasons in American Community*

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CROSS AMERICA are numerous collections of Masonic objects and historical artifacts. Most of these objects are displayed in Grand Lodge buildings and libraries, some are in local lodges, while a few appear in history and art museums. But what is the purpose of these display cases filled with old aprons, past masters jewels, fine porcelain, and countless badges from conventions and conclaves? Are they simply “curiosity cabinets” for Freemasons to show their activities and travel souvenirs? Are they decorations and ornaments that enhance the grandeur and beauty of lodges? Or are these massed artifacts expected to impress people of the fraternity’s legitimacy and ancient heritage just as some families’ display their coat of arms or genealogy charts? Do these Masonic artifacts have real historic value? Do they teach, inspire or are they simply nice things to please the eye? This article

will explain how the National Heritage Museum (NHM) sought to answer these questions by creating a new interpretation of Masonic artifacts in an exhibition that would both explain Freemasonry and tell its history.

The National Heritage Museum (formerly the Museum of Our National Heritage) located in Lexington, Massachusetts was built by the Scottish Rite Masons of the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction in 1975. A gift to the American people during the Bicentennial celebration, the museum has presented over 275 exhibition with American history topics ranging from colonial period furniture to the Route 66 Highway. The museum also inherited the Scottish Rite's large Masonic library, collection of historic artifacts, and invaluable Supreme Council, N.M.J., archives. These materials became the foundation of the museum's broader collections and naturally lead to presenting Masonic history as part of its overall mission. In the last twenty-five years the museum expanded this mission to include other American fraternal organizations, such as the Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias, and the Grange. Through this process it has become the only museum in the country that actively acquires preserves and presents the history of American fraternal organizations. While many fraternal organizations collect their own history, the National History Museum holds not only artifacts from Freemasonry, but also from the Sons of Temperance, and Ancient Order of Hibernians to the Loyal Order of Moose, Rotary International, and many others.

The museum with its library and archives, holds over 75,000 artifacts, books and archives—postcards, minute books, aprons, costumes, photographs, and furniture. The museum has presented over twelve fraternal-related exhibitions from these collections, most of which focused on Masonic symbols in decorative or fine arts or as overviews to American ritual-based fraternal organizations. The first exhibits curated by Barbara Franco, "Masonic Symbols in American Decorative Arts" and "Decorated Masonic Aprons," remain important contributions to bringing the history of the Craft to connoisseurs and collectors. The museum's second curator, John Hamilton, continued Franco's legacy by building the Masonic decorative arts collections and staging the 1995 exhibition "Initiating America: Three centuries of American Lodge Life."

When John Ott became the museum's executive director in 1999, "Initiating America" had been up for more than four years, and he suggested starting a new strictly Blue Lodge exhibition project. At that time I had only worked at the museum for five months and had been a Freemason for only eighteen. Hired as the assistant curator, I soon found myself the institution's sole "Masonic expert" when John Hamilton left for a director's job at another museum.



**EXHIBITION ENTRANCE.** At left is the introductory panel and an image of “A Mason formed out of his material, 1763.” Through this panel the visitor receives an overview of the exhibit, its organization, and a basic explanation of Masonic terms. The large graphic is meant to attract people into the gallery and provide a first impression of Masonic symbolism. Visitors will see this image again on a small creamer pitcher from the 1700s. “Who are Masons” contains eleven well-known Americans, including Homer Simpson of cartoon fame. The images slide up and visitors can identify the people and their Masonic lodges. The purpose is to connect real Americans with the fraternity and to let visitors meet familiar people who are members of a potentially unfamiliar organization.

Although enthusiastic to curate a new Masonic exhibition I quickly realized that I would need a great deal of support and advice to make it successful. Fortunately the museum's staff of educators, librarians, registrars, the designer, and collections managers, all provided vital and invaluable support. I also solicited outside historians and Freemasons to act as consultants for the project. By December 1999 Steven Bullock, Barbara Franco, S. Brent Morris, Thomas W. Jackson, and William D. Moore, among others, all agreed to review the exhibition's scripts and suggest important artifacts for display.

#### FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS OF MASONIC EXHIBITIONS

My first task in the exhibition process was to begin a rough script, but I was quickly confronted by a fundamental dilemma. Should the exhibition consist of wonderful and beautiful Masonic artifacts that would explain what Freemasonry teaches and how it operates, or should it be the history of American Freemasonry presented through the common artifacts of generations of men who joined the Craft? In other words, should the exhibition attempt a specific explanation of Freemasonry through its timeless symbols, tenets, and founding brothers, or should it provide a broader understanding of the Craft through its ever-changing activities, rites, auxiliaries, and ordinary objects? While both interpretations would please Freemasons, the first would largely appeal to historians and connoisseurs; the second might attract a broader audience who could learn about the Craft and perhaps something about Freemasons in their family or the Masonic temple in their community.

Considering these two presentations lead to a third question: What would be the point of view of the exhibition? Would the story be told from a historian's point of view or a Freemason's? As a historian I had the responsibility to present a fair and balanced account of Freemasonry in America. If we discussed George Washington as a Freemason, then we should also mention Benedict Arnold or discuss the Anti-Masonic Period. If we talked about Masonic "brotherly love" and the universality of Masonry, then we should also address Prince Hall Freemasonry, women, and atheists. But would this move the exhibit away from a historical exhibition and instead become a debate on the merits and misdeeds of the fraternity? Would that mean I would have to assume the role of an official spokesman for the fraternity? Might this cause the exhibition to be viewed simply as apologetic or a glorification of the Craft? Further, I was concerned that if I purposely set about addressing controversial issues, would the exhibit become bogged down trying to explain every visitor's question or misconception.



**EXHIBITION INTRODUCTORY AREA.** After reading the exhibition introductory panel visitors moves through a short overview of the origins of Freemasonry. This area also acts as a gathering space for group tours. At the left and left center are seen objects relating to stonemason guilds, Enlightenment philosophers and the first Freemasons of London. The black rectangular-shaped iron plate in the distance is in the exhibit's next section on Colonial American Freemasonry. That iron plate is a "fireback" with the arms of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts. This fireback was made for Joseph Webb (1734–1787), a merchant who was the Master of Boston's Lodge of Saint Andrew in 1765–1766 and Grand Master of Massachusetts from 1784–1786.

I began my first exhibition script drafts with these issues and a preliminary opening date of July 2001. Over the course of the next several months I tried several different approaches balancing between Masonic explanations and American History. My first idea was to display three period Masonic lodge rooms: an 1800s Eastern lodge, a 1900s Midwestern lodge, and a 21st century Western lodge. These rooms would show Freemasonry evolving with the nation, while showing that the ritual and symbols remained unchanged through history. The museum staff and outside consultants quickly pointed out the difficulty of fabricating such displays and the apprehension many visitors might have entering a ritual space. Although this idea never came to fruition, exploring it enabled me to get a clearer vision of the realities of an exhibition's limits of time, money, and space.

By April of 2000 I had begun a complete script revamp to find a new solution. With the help of the new director of exhibition, Hilary Anderson, the exhibition's opening date was moved to February 2002, and the exhibition's mission was narrowed to answering two basic questions: 1) What is Freemasonry? And 2) Why do men join?

The first question would provide the means to present Masonic symbols, tenets and even quotes from the rituals. The second question would provide the historical component allowing an understanding that the reasons men have joined have changed over time. If the visitor left the exhibit with satisfactory answers to these questions then the exhibition would be successful.

A third issue, integrity of presentation or reporting versus promotion, would be incorporated into the mission and interwoven through the exhibit. There would be no one place where we would state: "We are reporting historical facts" or "We are promoting Freemasonry." Rather the visitor would come to trust the presentation by how honestly we answered the two questions. We hoped that if the visitor knew about Freemasonry and agreed with our explanation, then they would trust our history. Or if a visitor knew history and agreed with our interpretation, then they would trust our explanation of Freemasonry.

We also accepted that zealous anti-Masons or conspiracy paranoids would never fully trust our explanation of either the Craft or our history, regardless of our earnestness. The exhibition objectivity might be perceived as tainted by its location in a museum almost wholly funded by Freemasons. But we hoped mistrustful visitors might at least ask themselves: "If Freemasonry is a secret society, why am I learning about it in a Masonic exhibition within a free public museum built by Freemasons?"



**INTRODUCTORY SECTION: ORIGINS OF FREEMASONRY.** This view of the introductory area explains three separate communities that Freemason borrowed from to create their fraternity. These communities are (from left to right) Judeo-Christian religion, stonemasons guilds, and Enlightenment philosophers. These three communities were nominally united by their reverence for King Solomon's Temple. Some of the artifacts displayed here include an English Bible published in 1584, stone masons' tools from the 1600s, and early scientific instruments (center). To the right of the Doric pillar another interactive display allows visitors to test various shaped wood blocks by the plumb, level and square to see the operative use of Masonic symbols. In the center foreground are a 1500s armillary sphere model and a 1750s telescope lent by the Adler Planetarium and Astronomy Museum, Chicago, Illinois.

### USE OF "CONTEXT" IN THE PRESENTATION

By discussing what visitors wanted to learn, we found a key to presenting the unfamiliar subject of Freemasonry: context provided clarity. By surrounding the unfamiliar with the familiar, visitors could feel comfortable encountering new ideas. Through its adoration of George Washington and other famous American Masons the fraternity has done it for years. Both Barbara Franco and John Hamilton used this technique in their exhibitions by displaying familiar furniture and furnishings decorated with Masonic symbols.

In this exhibition, however, we would use Masonic symbols as they appeared in their broader applications. For example, Rhode Island uses the anchor of hope and Utah uses the beehive of industry in their state seals. Different religions use the all-seeing eye, while many trade unions use clasped hands or tools in their logos. In this manner, we considered using the Great Seal on the dollar bill as the exhibition's introductory image.

On the history side we would use chronology to place in context the reasons why men joined the fraternity. It is no surprise that Masonic membership rose with General George Washington, declined after the Morgan Affair or rose again as Masons Garfield and McKinley and Roosevelt were elected presidents.

But in this exhibition we would tie the reasons for joining the Craft to broader movements and changes. The Shrine, for example, could not have created a national organization for affluent and fun-loving men without abundant leisure time, or the communication and transportation networks of the late-1800s Industrial Age.

Additionally, the development of large cities, a separate youth culture, the Jazz Age, and the precedent of the Boy Scouts all caused the formation of DeMolay for Boys, Rainbow Girls, and Job's Daughters in the 1920s.

The exhibition would answer the larger question of why anyone would join any fraternal organization, through an introduction of non-Masonic and Masonic-affiliated organizations. If the visitor could answer this question, then they would understand why men would join Freemasonry.

The seven answers to this question became self-improvement, performing rituals, mutual benefit, social activities, business connections, family participation, and community service. If a visitor understood why Freemason Melvin Jones started Lions International or James Davis, 33°, built the Loyal Order of Moose, then they would understand why millions of ordinary men joined Freemasonry.

Presenting an organizational overview helped answer the first question of explaining what Freemasonry is. Displaying symbols, tenets, and activities of



**SECTION I: ESTABLISHING COLONIAL AND EARLY AMERICAN FREEMASONRY.** After learning that the first Masonic Grand Lodge was created in London in 1717, visitors pass into the area on American Freemasonry in the 1700s. On the left are items from various colonial and revolutionary lodges, included in the center is an apron used by a Massachusetts Mason during the Revolution. It incorporates symbols from each of the founding communities: King Solomon's Temple, stone masons' tools, and classical pillars with Greek gods representing wisdom, strength and beauty. In the background is a display on the early American Republic (1783–1825). This first section ends with the Anti-Masonic Period of about 1826–1840 (not seen). At right and flanked by “two brazen pillars” is the entrance to the exhibit's second section.

the Knights of Columbus, Rotary International, the Elks, and other familiar organizations, visitors would thereby understand two facts. First, that these organizations are similar to Freemasonry, and, second, their symbols, logos, and emblems often derived from Freemasonry because most of them were founded by Masons. Lastly with such a spectrum of organizations, visitors might even make a second deductive leap: If the Elks and Rotarians are not in a great conspiracy to run the world, and Freemasonry is similar to these friendly societies, then Freemasons are not in a conspiracy to rule the world.

But as I challenged non-Mason visitors, I would also challenge Masons. I wanted my brothers to understand how the Craft has radically changed from the day George Washington laid the cornerstone of the United States Capital. Rather than seeing the usual parade of great Americans who joined a lodge, they would witness Americans taking the lessons of the Craft to create new organizations. Some of these, like DeMolay, the Shrine, or Eastern Star are part of the fraternity, but others such as the Elks, B'nai B'rith, or the Grange are not Masonic.

By incorporating symbolic, historical and fraternal context the exhibition crossed a great hurdle, and in July 2000 I completed a new script with a strong mission statement:

This exhibit will explain what Blue Lodge Freemasonry is and why men have joined it for 250 years. It will achieve this through highlighting other familiar voluntary organizations that exemplify Masonic qualities. By understanding that men join organizations with a specific purpose, a visitor will understand why men join Freemasonry, which has many purposes. The birth, growth and evolution or decline of all the voluntary organizations will provide the historical component.

#### THEMATIC VERSUS CHRONOLOGICAL

The result of the consultants' review, however, created a new concern: Whether to present a thematic or chronological exhibition? While the Masonic consultants preferred chronology, the academics leaned toward theme. On the one hand, the reasons men joined the fraternity would be tied to dates and events. On the other, they would be tied to such issues as class, race, gender, immigration, the development of cities, and industrial, consumer, or service economies.

Trying to find a solution to this dilemma, I understood a chronology necessary in exhibitions where visitors often have only a vague understanding of the span of years between the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address (four score and seven) or between General George Custer and General



**FREEMASONRY AND THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION.** To the left is the Bucktrout Masonic chair. On loan from Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. Peyton Randolph (1721–1775) probably used this chair as Provincial Grand Master of Virginia in the 1770s. Shortly after the outbreak of the Revolution, this chair was taken to Edenton, North Carolina, where it stood in Unanimity Lodge No. 7 until 1983, when it was returned to Williamsburg. The first degree tracing board (right) is on loan from the Grand Lodge of Nova Scotia and was used in a New York City lodge during the 1770s. After the Revolution Loyalist members of the lodge took it with them to Nova Scotia, Canada. Its display here is the first time it has returned to the “colonies” since the 1780s. Lastly, below the tracing board is a first edition of Benjamin Franklin’s reprint of James Anderson’s *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*—the first Masonic book published in America.

George Patton. Visitors also like to see time lines and artifacts showing an evolution from the “bad old days” to the “good new ones.” Using a chronology exhibition would create a continuum of famous Freemasons from Benjamin Franklin to Michael Richards.

On the thematic side, such historical forces as industrialization, urbanization, gender, class, and race have had far greater impact on Freemasonry than most great events or men. Certainly slavery and segregation are why there are Prince Hall lodges. The dangers and death of factories, mines, and railroads of the 1800s prompted Freemasons to build homes and hospitals. The development of great corporations, white-collar professions, and the suburbs are why Masonic square clubs and High Twelve International flourished and why Grand Lodges emphasized community service projects.

I realized that the exhibition would have enough trouble explaining Freemasonry without also having to explain these historical forces, so I decided on a chronological presentation. If the exhibition’s subject was familiar to most people—such as the telephone or department stores or jazz music—then we might have attempted a more sophisticated approach. My decision was confirmed by trying to place the timelessness of Masonic symbols and rituals into dynamic American cultural forces. This proved impossible, for part of Freemasonry’s purpose is to be a refuge from the outside world. Lodge minutes rarely record current events or mention local or national matters.

In search of a solution to this dilemma, I nonetheless attempted to place certain thematic issues into a chronology of why men join, and to my surprise, it solved the whole issue! It became apparent that men joined Freemasonry in the 1840s and 1850s more for self-improvement, than, say, performing the ritual. Mutual-beneficence was particularly attractive in the late 1800s before social security, unions, and HMOs, and community service became more important after World War I. Certain thematic issues tied nicely to these time periods and the reasons for joining. Immigration and migration was important in the 1850s, industrialization in the 1880s, and urbanization in the 1910s.

But where to include race, gender, class, and other classifications in the exhibit? I had already determined to tell the story of Prince Hall Freemasonry beginning in the first display cases and along the way. I then decided to add Masonic and other women’s organizations, ethnic and religious fraternities. While purposely displaying Masonic and American diversity I also accepted the fact that the majority of the exhibit’s historical figures would be white Protestant men. If visitors received the impression that most American Masons are white



**FREEMASONRY AND THE EARLY REPUBLIC.** The display (left) shows a 1820s New Hampshire tavern sign with the square and compasses, an Indian tomahawk pipe loaned by the Detroit Institute of Art with square and compasses on its blade, and a set of silver lodge jewels made by Paul Revere, among other items. On the right center we discuss George Washington as Mason and his laying of the U.S. Capitol cornerstone. The trowel from that ceremony is just right of the pillar and was loaned by Alexandria-Washington Lodge No. 22, Alexandria, Virginia.

and Protestant, that would be completely acceptable, for it is a fact. But I also hoped visitors might receive two additional impressions; white Protestant men taught generations of dissimilar Americans to organize and grow their own volunteer organizations. Second (and contrary to recent popular perceptions) white Protestant men have done many good and generous things and continue to live charitably toward people all over the world.

#### EXHIBITION DESIGN AND PRESENTATION

Throughout these long discussions of interpretation and presentation, we had to remember we were creating a three-dimensional, multi-sensory public experience, not writing a book or a preparing a college seminar. Knowing that most visitors spend less than thirty minutes in an exhibit, the story must be succinct and engaging. The gallery space was also only 1,500 square feet and had to accommodate hundreds of objects, photographs, labels, and of course, allow visitors easy passage. As one of the museum's four galleries, the exhibition should also complement and enhance a patron's complete visit.

The first concern in designing the gallery was to make the exhibit an inviting and comfortable atmosphere for people to both learn and enjoy. The museum's reputation of presenting popular history exhibitions, such as the American Dinner, Summer Camps, and Route 66, provided the perfect model. Much of Freemasonry's public relations problem lies in its history books that are usually written by Masons for Masons, thereby being inherently inaccessible to the general public and professional historians. This tradition and the Craft's privacy have caused many to believe the fraternity was exclusive and odd. Through a successful exhibit design we hoped to present American Freemasonry as accessible and mainstream as other American institutions, such as country fairs, nightclubs, softball leagues, and grass-roots action committees.

The second concern was to ensure the exhibit answered the visitor's most basic questions. The staff conducted a visitor's survey to determine what, if anything, they knew about Freemasonry. The results were incorporated into the exhibition's mission and helped determined its educational goals. Beyond enjoying the tour of the gallery, we wanted visitors to understand at least three things: Freemasons are not stonemasons; the fraternity has fundamental membership requirements; and Freemasons meet in private but are not secretive.

Combining ideas from all these lines of thought led to a cityscape design. Rather than forcing visitors to walk through Masonic temples we would place one temple among a variety of buildings. Each building would be a facade for a



**ENTRANCE TO SECTION II: BUILDING FRATERNITY AND COMMUNITY.** In this gallery area we explain how Freemasonry rebuilt itself after the Anti-Masonic Period of about 1826–1840. In the center foreground is the section introductory panel with various American community voluntary association and a Masonic Blue Lodge emblem at top. Using the tenets of brotherly love, relief, and truth, Masons supported new Masonic and numerous non-Masonic organizations that borrowed heavily from the fraternity. Around the courtyard, or city square, are seen four display area “buildings.” From left to right, a Masonic temple for dramatic rituals, a music hall with a canopy for social activities, an office building for business connections, and at right, a “factory” with Moose sign for mutual benefit and relief. Also not seen are a library for self-improvement, a house for family participation and a restaurant for community service.

display case area. Visitors could choose which “buildings” to enter and how they wished to understand Freemasonry. In this way the exhibit avoided “initiating” visitors through a lodge room. It also avoided the cliched presentation of Freemasonry as “mysterious and weird” and Masonic temples as “dark and dank.” Rather, the fraternity would appear in the bright sunshine of the cityscape’s public square. By first seeing familiar architecture, common symbols, and popular history visitors would be more at ease and receptive to understand Freemasonry.

The exhibition’s main section, set around 1900, would explain the reasons men joined Freemasonry or similar organizations. Each “building” display case would relate to the reason for joining. For example, artifacts explaining Masonic self-improvement activities, such as ritual lectures, leadership training, books, and libraries would be in a school. Visitors could also view other self-improvement from 1840s temperance leagues to present-day Toastmasters International. Other buildings would include a Masonic temple for ritual dramas, a dance hall for social activities, a factory for mutual benefit, an office building for business networking, a house for family participation, and a restaurant for community service projects.

#### CONCLUDING THE EXHIBITION

How to conclude the exhibition caused another dilemma. While it was agreed its “building” display cases should be of a modern design, we had to decide if it would explain the present state of American Freemasonry, make a prediction on its future, or offer an alternative. As a Freemason, I did not want to end the exhibition with graphs showing declining membership and growing number of lodge closings. As a historian, I did not want to make a prediction on the future of the Craft or other American volunteer organizations. Initially, I considered simply a series informational computer kiosks where visitors could get more of their questions answered. As a history exhibit, however, I was obliged to present artifacts more than information. I needed to make some sort of conclusion and unify the exhibition through a central argument.

Wrestling with the ending, I considered ways the general public might have had contact with Freemasonry or Freemasons. Shriners and their hospitals came to mind, as well as other Masonic charitable activities such as scholarships, disaster relief, museums, and libraries. Concurrently, I became aware that all the non-Masonic fraternal context might leave the visitor with the impression that Freemasonry was absolutely no different than the Loyal Order of Moose, Rotary International, or an amateur theater company.



**MASONIC RELIEF AND MUTUAL BENEFIT.** In this display area we discuss how Masons used the tenet of relief to help, aid, and assist distressed brothers, widows, and orphans. In the display case on the right are postcards and materials related to Masonic homes and a ledger book from the 1877 Masonic Board of Relief of Albany, New York. At the right are artifacts from the Ancient Order United Workmen (AOUW). Freemason John Jordan Upchurch in Meadville, Pennsylvania founded AOUW in 1868 as the first workers' mutual-benefit fraternal in America. Seen here is an AOUW lodge altar with a Bible, square and compasses, and anchor on its front, an AOUW symbols chart, and a photograph of a Washington State lodge. The 1880s man's suit at left is to provide a "human" presence in the gallery and to help carry the exhibit's chronology.

Certainly many organizations provide charity and support to their members, some even have hospitals and homes, while most hold conventions, have auxiliaries, and initiation rituals. If the exhibit retained a broad range of organizations surrounding Freemasonry, then another question would have to be answered: What distinguishes Freemasonry as an American institution?

After much thought I concluded that two overall factors distinguished Freemasonry. First its rituals—not just the three degrees, but the York Rite’s epic themes and the Scottish Rite’s grand productions—taught a complex philosophy and morality unmatched in any association. Within this system is Freemasonry’s unique world-view that reveres King Solomon’s Temple and other “valuable monuments of antiquity” that “escaped not the unsparing ravages of barbarous force.” As conveyed by its symbols, Freemasonry has a specific neo-classical aesthetic with an expressed purpose to enlighten men who will not only defend society against “the ruthless hand of ignorance” but also build it with wisdom, strength, and beauty.

The other distinguishing feature of the Craft is its charity. All groups or clubs create brotherly love and affection in their gatherings, but Freemasonry encourages its members to travel to other lodges and requires its members to go to a brother in need. In forms of charity, Freemasonry excels all others. No American voluntary association can match the amount donated annually by Masons. From individual “poor and distressed brothers” to hospitals, homes, and museums, no other organization is broader in its giving. And no other fraternity is as universal in giving regardless of Masonic affiliation, race, religion, or wealth.

Masonic charity and its rituals that teach philanthropy, became the answer for the conclusion: a presentation of modern Masonic charity. In this way visitors might understand why Masons do the work they do. This explanation pointed to Masonry’s standard purpose of “making good men better” through rituals that create a fraternity of charitable men, rather than simply a charitable organization of initiated men. This conclusion would avoid making predictions for the future of the Craft and would help alleviate Masons’ anxiety over their declining membership by showing it actively responding to the needs of others. Masonic charity has taught generations of Americans to found and build countless new charitable organizations that have helped tens of millions of people.

This new script allowed a reincorporating of Masonic structure and symbolism into the design. By viewing the exhibition’s three sections as the three degrees, I went from displaying tracing boards from three centuries to turning the whole gallery into a walk-through tracing board.



**MASONIC RITUALS AND DRAMA.** Within the Masonic Temple (“Entrance to Section II”) is at left a photograph of a Blue Lodge degree team. In center is a King Solomon costume from the Valley of Buffalo, N.Y.. The “wallpaper” is a reproduction of a Scottish Rite backdrop depicting Jerusalem when the Temple was built. The original is in the Holak Collection, Performing Arts Archives, University of Minnesota Libraries. Also partially seen is (left) an open copy of the 1958 *Life Magazine* showing the Masonic degree structure and (right) a open copy of the Massachusetts *Official Ritual Ciph*er and a postcard of the Oklahoma Indian Masonic Degree Team.

“COMMUNITY” TO UNIFY THE EXHIBITION

The discussion following the new draft, circulated to staff and consultants in December 2000, brought a unifying and final theme: community. Rather than concentrating on a Masonic landscape or a gallery-sized “tracing board,” we would focus on the “building” display cases that create a gallery-sized “town.” Visitors would move in and out of the display areas, and the exhibition would move from the private community of a lodge to public communities of family, friends, and work. “Community” could also be used to describe the lodges that make a Grand Lodge, the community of other volunteer associations, or even the neighborhoods and cities that make the community of the United States.

The interaction between Masonic communities and American communities also established the driving historical argument. The exhibition would show how Freemasonry affected, and was affected by, communities in America. Masonically speaking, it means American men traveling from west to east and back again to help, aid, and assist others. Visitors could then see how Freemasons have used the Craft’s principles to practice countless charitable activities and found new organizations that sustain present-day communities. Conversely, brothers often brought outside trends and innovations into the lodge and changed the fraternity leading to the advent of the Eastern Star, the Shrine, and many other new forms and traditions.

The exhibition therefore had two themes: American community building and American Freemasonry. The primary theme created the exhibit’s history component. By understanding why and how the country grew, through immigration, industrialization, urbanization, and so forth, the visitor would understand the forces that brought people together in organizations and why men join Freemasonry. This context provided honest, simple history and answers that might alleviate most visitors’ suspicions and misconceptions. This context would allow visitors to learn of Masonry’s past discrimination of African Americans, for example, and not be surprised, since at that time the whole country practiced slavery and segregation. Conversely, while Freemasons and Americans regret such history, displaying recent activities would help dispel the misconception that Freemasonry is inherently racist.

Community would successfully answer the second theme of what Freemasonry stands for. By explaining the fraternity as men who meet for a variety of reasons, the exhibit could achieve its educational goals. Most importantly, visitors would learn what Freemasonry is not: not a secret society like a hate group; not stonemasons like a union; not religious like a church; but simply a fraternity.



**MASONIC SOCIAL ACTIVITIES—SHRINERS.** This display area has a facade of a music hall (“Entrance to Section II”). Here we show how men have joined Freemasonry to enjoy social activities. Lodges that first met in taverns and “table lodge” traditions, led, in part, to the creation of the Ancient Arabic Order Nobles of the Mystic Shrine in 1872. In the center is a Raja Shrine, Reading, Pennsylvania, parade band costume. Seen partially on the right is an original 1939 print of Bro. Grant Wood’s “Shrine Quartet.”

This fraternity was not defined however, by famous Freemasons, such as George Washington or Harry Truman, but by three centuries of ordinary men doing extraordinary things in their communities. Through practicing Freemasonry's universal philosophy, membership and charity, the uniquely American form of the fraternity was established.

The staff and consultants made another insightful comment on the script. They suggested reducing the exhibition's number of non-Masonic organizations. This would achieved several things, first it kept the focus squarely on Freemasonry while reducing the amount of research and number of artifacts that would need collecting. Perhaps more importantly the need to inundate the gallery with Masonic symbols and rituals would disappear. By trimming away the underbrush of symbols, the Masonic trees could be clearly seen.

In the process of cutting a third of the display cases, the final unifying theme indeed emerged. While the three exhibit sections retained a connection to the three degrees, the three Masonic tenets of brotherly love, relief, and truth would connect Freemasonry's birth, why men join, and its modern activities.

#### SELECTING OBJECTS FOR DISPLAY

In March 2001, the script was at last complete with two strong themes of Freemasonry and American community to guide the interpretation. After moving the opening date back to June 2002, we now had to select artifacts for display. This process is the culmination of a museum curator's vocation. His choices not only must show physical evidence that supports the exhibit's thesis, but also should be intriguing, fun, sometime unique, sometimes ordinary, sometimes familiar, and sometimes strange. Exhibitions show things, not simply describe them.

Studying past Masonic exhibitions and visiting lodge and Grand Lodge museums, I realized many of these displays simply showed cases filled with old Masonic "stuff." While many Masons might view these objects with pride or in fond remembrance of past events or brothers, to non-Masons they are just souvenirs decorated with odd symbols. The challenge for this exhibition would be to find a way to present this "stuff" of history that would bring it to life.

To me, all Masonic artifacts are ultimately physical evidence of the abstract concept of fraternity. Aprons, jewels, certificates, and much more speak of friendships that lasted a lifetime. Friendships that often began at initiation, survived and grew through good times and bad, and ended with a deposit of an evergreen sprig at the grave. But within the gallery, I had to tell these wonderful stories through a few choice objects.



**MASONIC SOCIAL ACTIVITIES CONTINUES—THE ELKS.** Some New York City Masons formed the Shrine in 1872, but others had created the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks in 1867. While not a Masonic organization, the Elks borrowed from Freemasonry in their symbols, organization, and regalia. At left is an unsigned 1902 Elks membership lithograph showing various Elks symbols and vignettes from the ritual and charitable work. In the center are three photographs from Elks Lodge No. 168 in San Diego, California. Like the Shrine, Elks lodges provide a wide variety of social activities, and members choose separate clubs to work and play in, while remaining a part of the larger lodge. Seen here is an Elks softball team, a marching unit, and some clowns in an Elks' parade jalopy, all from 1932. On the right is an Elk's apron from the African-American Elks probably worn in Midway Lodge No. 241 in Riedsville, North Carolina in the 1960s. The fact that the Elks chose to wear aprons as regalia shows the direct influence Freemasonry had upon it.

With this goal in mind we established several criteria to guide the selection of objects. First, visitors prefer to see genuine things made, owned, and used by real people. It would not be enough to display something beautiful—say a Past Master’s jewel—unless visitors could learn about the man who wore it. Second, we wanted a variety of types of artifacts. They should range from fine art and furniture to unique lodge furnishings and the ephemera of daily life, such as lodge notices and dues cards. But of these, perhaps the most important would be photographs that showed groups of Masons. in the lodge, at banquets, and active in communities. Through these images we would demonstrate the popularity and presence of Freemasonry in American.

Third, we would have artifacts spanning three centuries—from at least 1717 up to 2001. The last criterion was to include things from as many as states as possible. In this way we would reinforce the universality of Freemasonry, the concept of American community, and perhaps peak the interest of vacationing visitors by showing them something from their home state.

Throughout the long development process we continued to identify many key items. Certainly we would include a copy of a first edition of Anderson’s *Constitutions*, a set of silver lodge officers’ jewels made by Paul Revere, and other famous Masonic objects from around the country. But because the museum’s collections were weaker in 20th-century Masonic and in other organizations’ objects, we had to acquire or borrow most of these. We created a computer database to organize and track the hundreds of objects for potential display.

For more representational objects, such as a photograph of a Masonic banquet, we assigned them to states not yet present in the exhibition. By connecting the database with a mailing list we could contact Grand Lodges, Scottish Rite valleys or other Masonic bodies asking for specific objects. Many desired objects, such as Justice Thurgood Marshall’s Masonic apron, simply did not exist, while others, such as 33° rings, we had by the bushel.

While the hunt for desired artifacts concentrated in the museum’s and Grand Lodges’ collections, we also contacted twenty-five states and local museums and historical societies, such as the Detroit Institute of Art and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. We also worked with non-Masonic organizations and received great cooperation from the Loyal Order of Moose and Rotary International, among others. Lastly, we used Internet auction sites and a network of antique dealers to acquire many objects.

By October 2001, we had achieved most of our selection criteria. Objects came from over thirty-five states, numerous Masonic organization, ranging



**MASONIC FAMILY TRADITIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS.** In this “house” display area the importance of Masonic family participation and Masonic family organizations are explained. Based on the tenet of brotherly love, men often join their fathers’ and the Order of Eastern Star (OES) in the 1850s, Freemasonry has continued to create new organizations for the family participation. At the bottom left is a “flip book” binder for visitors to see well-known Americans who participated in the Order of Eastern Star, Demolay for Boys, Job’s Daughters, and Rainbow for Girls. The top photograph shows three generations of Masons in Mount Pleasant Lodge No. 8, Mount Pleasant, Iowa in 2001. Below is a group photograph of the Grand Bethel of Wyoming with their parents in 1989. At the left center is a humorous image.,ca. 1908, of a young woman with her arms around a Mason. It reads below: “I love to Love a Mason ’cause a Mason never tells.” Below is a Mohawk Valley, New York family chart incorporating Masonic symbols dated 1803 (the founding father’s first name is Solomon). In the case to the left is a 1930 OES mirror from Texas Chapter No. 35, San Antonio, a Massachusetts Rainbow Girls stand and Merit Bar, and a small Acacia College Fraternity pin.

through many styles, types and materials and in age spanning from a stone from the Jerusalem's Temple Mount to a letter thanking Masons for contributing to the 9/11/2001 disaster relief.

Throughout the various script drafts and interpretive points the database of objects was continually modified. In the end, all the objects had to be reconciled with the exhibition's design and galley's limited space. Even up until the last two weeks before the opening some objects had to be cut from the show. From a total number of over 1,000 objects, slowly the number was reduced in stages until less than 200 are now on display.

### CONCLUSIONS

After nearly two and a half years of researching, writing, and planning, the exhibition at last opened on June 1, 2002. After the long process I am still wondering what the purpose is for collecting and displaying Masonic artifacts. Is it to impress, to inform, or to entertain? While Masonic exhibitions can certainly try to be all things to all people, there will always be restrictions.

First, due to the Craft's esoteric nature, all exhibitions will have to start with a basic explanation of its origins, purposes, and organization. This is compounded by endless differences in Masonic rituals, auxiliaries, governance, and charities that perplex even 50-year brothers. If Freemasonry ever again became as familiar as department stores or even the PTA or as popular as it was in 1800 or 1900, then more complex and innovative exhibitions could be attempted.

Unfortunately, most Masonic displays still assume the Craft is widely popular and familiar. They usually concentrate on long-gone, famous Masons, trying to resolve anti-Mason's misconceptions, or trumpeting their wonderful charitable activities. What the fraternity must come to grips with is that most members of its "hall of fame" neither interest today's public nor are among the truly great men of Freemasonry, such as Rob Morris, Albert Mackey or Frank S. Land. Furthermore, they need to shed their persecution complex while realizing every American fraternity has wonderful charity programs. Lastly, the majority of Americans have neither a positive nor a negative perception of Freemasonry. At best, they are vaguely aware of Freemasons and typecast them as humorous, and weird just as they view ghosts, "Area 51" aliens, or obsessive fans of cult movies.

This current climate of ignorance is both a curse and blessing. The fraternity is adrift trying to determine a new mission and explanation of itself as the majority of anti-Masons are now worrying about bigger "international threats"; the last truly famous Mason, Gerald Ford, left the White House in 1977. On the



**MASONIC FAMILY TRADITIONS AND ORGANIZATIONS—CONTINUED.** On the back wall of the Masonic family “house” display area is (left) a small plaster figure, ca. 1910, with a man and woman sitting within a Masonic square and compasses. Etched in the base below reads “Love on the Square.” In the center is a Demolay for Boys jacket from Arlington Massachusetts. To the right are objects from the Knights of Columbus. While the Knights are not Masonic, they did borrow from the fraternity to create their own Catholic family organizations. On the wall is an unsigned membership lithograph chart from 1912 and below in the case is President John Kennedy’s Knights of Columbus dues cards and a pin from the women’s organization the Daughters of Isabella.

other hand, the Craft now has an opportunity to present the fraternity in the way and manner of its choosing. Freemasonry can begin working more closely with non-Masonic scholars and history museums to facilitate a broader and richer understanding of its long and complex history. This goal must start, however, with Grand Lodges and other governing Masonic bodies providing the resources and professional staff to better organize, care for, and promote their collections. A great start would be simply inviting local professors and museum curators to a special tour of the collections. These activities must also follow up with long-term commitments to financially support all researchers and public museums interested in pursuing topics related to the Craft.

It is my firm belief that if Freemasonry ever hopes to receive its due consideration and a fair public understanding, it will not come through “official histories” or “institutional promotional press kits,” but only when highly respected non-masons produce thorough and fair assessments, in whatever media, of Freemasonry. Certainly the recent publication of Jasper Ridley’s *The Freemasons* and Steven Bullock’s 1996 book *Revolutionary Brotherhood* are great strides in the right direction.

Freemasonry can decide not to present public exhibitions that explain or promote itself at all. While this is a radical suggestion and contradicts much of what I have argued in this paper, the choice merits consideration. One of my persistent concerns during the exhibition process was whether Freemasonry was simply too abstract and complex a concept for public consumption. By this I am not implying that Americans are not sufficiently intelligent to comprehend Freemasonry, rather something deeper. Perhaps we need to study the obligations, lectures, and traditions that encouraged Freemasonry to remain aloof from the fickle and rough and tumble ways of the public. If the Craft expects men to “ask, seek, and knock,” then let the public do likewise if they are interested in its history. There is a far greater urgency to educate and encourage participation among men already initiated than among the uninitiated public. It is easy enough to let stand the massed displays of aprons and past masters jewels or thousands of Masonic books and archives sitting on dusty shelves. They do no harm and a little good as lodge decorations and trophies of past glories.

But as a historian first and a Mason second, I fundamentally believe Freemasonry, with all its aprons, jewels, badges, and certificates, has rich stories to tell. They must be told because they reveal the fundamental dynamic of American society and history: how do men who live in private and restrictive communities seek to “unite men of every country, sect and opinion, and conciliate



**EXHIBITION SECTION III—AMERICAN FREEMASONRY TODAY.** The exhibition's third and final section discusses how Masons continue to employ their tenets of brotherly love, relief, and truth to sustain today's American communities. Relating to relief, this photograph includes a set of hand-made crutches from the Greenville Shrine Hospital for Children at Greenville, South Carolina. In 1930 a Shriner made these crutches for his granddaughter, Ina Tucker. Also seen are photographs of her as a child and as an adult. Across the top are: a photograph from a Scottish Rite 32° Masonic Learning Center for Children, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, showing a child being tutored, and a letter from a disaster relief agency to the Supreme Council, 33°, N.M.J. thanking Masons for their contribution to September 11, 2001, relief fund. Below are two books for visitors to read: left is S. Brent Morris' *Masonic Philanthropies: a Tradition of Caring*, and right is Kent Henderson's and Tony Pope's *Freemasonry Universal: A New Guide to the Masonic World, Volume I: The Americas*. Last is a 3-ring binder and pen for visitors to leave their own comments on the exhibition before they exit "stage right."

true friendship.” Telling these stories remains a challenge worthy of historians and Freemasons who are both dedicated to seeking truth.

*EDITOR’S NOTE: All photography is by David Bohl. The exhibit, “To Build and Sustain: Freemasons in American Community,” will run through at least 2006 at National Heritage Museum, 33 Marrett Road/Rt. 2A, Lexington, Massachusetts. For information: 781 861-6559, [www.monh.org](http://www.monh.org).*

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