

The Rise and Fall of Operative Masons

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Guilds of Operative Masons were present in England and Scotland as far back as the 1400's and were formed primarily to protect the practice of their craft, provide for their sick, and support their widows and children. In December 1583, King James VI of Scotland appointed one William Schaw as the Master of Works. He was also the General Warden of all Scottish stonemasons' lodges. Schaw oversaw the erection, repair and maintenance of all government buildings, and through the lodges, ensured that all building work was undertaken by suitably qualified persons.

In December 1598 and 1599, Schaw introduced two statutes to formulate these principles. The Schaw Statutes covered all aspect of the craft and largely hold true today. They enjoined masons to be true to one another and live charitably together as sworn brothers and companions, having taken a binding oath to this effect. There followed directives as to the regulation of the craft, including a provision that the masters of every lodge elect a warden each year to have charge of the lodge and that the choice be approved by the General Warden.

It also made compulsory for each Scottish lodge to appoint a secretary. Under the statutes, an apprentice was bound to his master to serve seven years before being received into the lodge

as an Entered Apprentice. Following other seven years, and having completed his apprenticeship, he sought a license granted by the warden, masters, and deacons duly assembled, and following examination by them on his worthiness, his qualifications and his skill, he became a Fellow Craft.

Gradually, 'Operative' lodges, dedicated to completing complex building projects, or undertaking specialist activities, allowed 'non-operatives' to join their membership. For example, most major long-term projects would have had external superintendents to oversee the quality of the work and they would be given access to their respective lodge. Similarly, there would be others sharing in directing activities, offering technical advice, producing drawings, organising material and labour and keeping accounts, all requiring access to the lodge.

The acceptance of 'non-operatives' would have influenced lodge ceremonies. A brother could not take an oath to keep the trade secrets about which he knew nothing. Neither could he produce a regular apprentice's masterpiece, as he would not possess the skills. However, from the earliest times, it was not deemed unlawful or irregular for Operative lodges to accept some non-operative men.

The 15th century saw the slow decline of Operative Masonry, and following the Protestant Reformation in England, it almost went out of existence. Most guilds were suppressed by Henry VIII and monasteries dissolved, their funds being confiscated by the Crown. Cathedrals were no longer erected and monasteries and abbeys defaced or partly demolished. Similar bitterness was directed against many other structures throughout the land. Many of the old Operative lodges previously called upon to erect or repair such buildings, found themselves out of work.

For the next hundred or so years, foreign and civil wars left

the country exhausted, and the need for men to fill the ranks of both the army and the navy reduced the skilled workforce even further. New cities sprang up with new traditions and at the same time, the shortage of labourers saw foreign workers sourced from the near continent, bringing with them their customs and traditions.

The Act of Union of 1707 united England and Scotland to form Great Britain and slowly, Operative Masonry morphed into Speculative Masonry. 1717 saw the formation of the Premier Grand Lodge of England which, has represented Freemasons working under the English Constitution ever since.

The United Grand Lodge of Scotland followed in 1736, and it could be said that Schaw's insistence that each Scottish lodge have a secretary was inspirational. The oldest lodge minutes surviving in England date from the early 18th century, whereas Scottish records are much older. It is from the minutes of Mother Kilwinning Lodge (1642) and Aberdeen Lodge (1670), together with other old documents, that we learn that non-operatives became members of Scottish Lodges and took an active part in lodge affairs.

The Anglo-French wars during the mid to late 1700's, continued to put a strain on finances further, reducing the workforce available for new large building projects, such that the British government banned skilled masons from emigrating, leaving many artisans without work. In America, George Washington had selected the site for the official residence of the Presidency in 1791, with the cornerstone laid a year later in 1792. James Hoban, who was an Irish Mason, was selected as the architect and overseer of the work.

Washington insisted that the house be built of stone and decorated with ornate carvings. However, there were few expert

quarry workers and stonemasons capable of producing intricate masonry and the commissioners turned to Scotland, offering generous wages and covering travel costs. Some twelve unemployed stonemasons defied the British government's ban and travelled to America in 1794.

By 1795, 99,000 cubic feet of Aquia Creek sandstone had been quarried and transported from Virginia. Although the stone differed from the sandstone worked at home, these craftsmen were able to carve hundreds of individual works of art onto the house, one of the finest being the Scottish Double Rose first cultivated by Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh. On Saturday, November 1, 1800, John Adams became the first president to take residence in the building. The house has been known by a variety of names, such as the 'President's Palace', the 'President's House' and, the 'Executive Mansion'. It wasn't until 1901 that President Theodore Roosevelt gave it the name 'The White House'.

With Operative Lodges of stonemasons having faded into the mists of time, their skill in working with that hard and difficult material is today ever more needed so that our great cathedrals and ancient monuments are maintained as our ancient brethren built them.

Modern technology has made a stonemason's life a lot easier with automated equipment such as computer- controlled machinery, specialist saws, water and air pressure tools to bring the stone into a rude form but, the maul and chisel as we know them, are still used to shape and polish the stone to be perfect in its parts and honourable to its builder.