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## “Brother Can You Spare a Friend?": Documents, Masculinities, and Histories in a Masonic Lodge

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“Brother Can You Spare a Friend?”:

Documents, Masculinities, and Histories in a Masonic Lodge

Senior Project Submitted to The Division of Anthropology of Bard College

by Hayden Franklyn William Hard

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. May, 2018.



*Dedicated to all brothers—past, present, and future—who embrace each other with friendship and brotherly love.*



## *Acknowledgements*

I'd first like to thank all of my brothers at Ancient Lodge. It has been a tremendous honor and privilege to become a member of your community, and I'm proud to call myself a Freemason. I look forward to seeing the world through a Masonic lens as I strive to become a better man. Although I'm moving away for a while, we will meet again—either in the lodge for a game of Five Card (nothing funny, Jacks or better) or in King Solomon's Temple.

A tremendous thank you to my advisor, Laura Kunreuther, for introducing me to anthropology, which has helped me make sense of, and feel grounded in, our baffling and chaotic world. In lieu of the existence of capital-T Truth, I'm confident that the 'truths' you have led me to are pretty damn good enough. I am immensely grateful for your knowledge and wisdom, and for helping me figure out what's important.

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Thank you to my mother, Marnie Goodman, for never letting me forget how proud you are, and for giving me the intellectual and emotional intelligence to move through life confidently. Thank you Gordon, my father and oldest friend—the foundational text of my personal canon—for teaching how to have friends who are old.

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## *Introduction*

### **The Fetish of Secrecy**

My first exposure to Freemasonry was as a nine-year-old boy, home with a stomach bug, binge-watching the Season Six boxset of *The Simpsons* over and over again. What ancient Greek myths or Shakespeare are to others, *The Simpsons* has been to me—a canon of cultural texts that has become a canon unto itself. In the episode “Homer the Great,” originally aired in January, 1995, Homer discovers that his friends Lenny and Carl receive certain privileges (a parking spot closer to the nuclear power plant where they all work, luxurious office chairs, free soda) because they are members of a secret society. After following his chums to an ominous temple and spying on their meeting, Homer—the bald, bumbling patriarch of the Simpson family—confronts Lenny and Carl the next day at the plant. “I saw weird stuff in that place last night. Weird, strange, sick, twisted, eerie, godless, evil stuff! And I want in!” (Rearden 1995). Carl responds, “We don’t, uh, know what you’re talking about, Homer.” But Lenny interjects, “And you can’t join the Stonecutters because it’s too exclusive!” Sighing, Carl says “Well, it was a real nice secret organization we had once.” Later in the episode, Homer goes on to become a Stonecutter, and, after disgracing himself in front of everyone, it is revealed that he bears the mark of the “chosen one,”<sup>1</sup> which he later finds is not all it’s cracked up to be.

The Stonecutters are clearly a send-up of the Freemasons, and they are represented throughout the episode as a mysterious, secret organization with vast power over global affairs. They wear magenta robes, and their ornate temple is lit by torches and furnished with Masonic symbols,

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<sup>1</sup> The Freemasons do not have a “chosen one,” and there are numerous other instances in the episode that do not accurately depict Masonry. For instance, to be a Stonecutter, one must be the son of a Stonecutter or save the life of one. As discussed below, the Masons have very different criteria for new members.



like the Eye of Providence and the Square and Compass. At one point, they sing the song “We Do” (which was nominated for an Emmy).

Who controls the British crown?  
 Who keeps the metric system down?  
 We do, we do  
 Who keeps Atlantis off the maps?  
 Who keeps the Martians under wraps?  
 We do, we do  
 Who holds back the electric car?  
 Who makes Steve Guttenberg a star?  
 We do, we do  
 Who robs gamefish of their site?  
 Who rigs every Oscar night?  
 We do, we do! (Rearden 1995)

The stereotype of the Freemasons as a secret society with a mysterious hold on global economics, politics and culture is actually extremely common. For instance, in the 2004 film *National Treasure*, Benjamin Franklin and his Masonic contemporaries have buried a massive stash of gold somewhere in the U.S.—and the modern-day character Benjamin Franklin Gates, played by Nicolas Cage, endeavors to uncover it. In Dan Brown’s popular mystery novel *The Lost Symbol*, the Masons are once again portrayed as a vast, secret organization, this time with occult accoutrements: a skull filled with wine and power brokers decked out in fabulous jewels are depicted in the book’s introduction. While it’s true that numerous American presidents (including George Washington, James Monroe, Teddy Roosevelt, and Harry S. Truman), world leaders (King George IV, Winston Churchill), businessmen (John Jacob Astor, Steve Wozniak), scientists (Isaac Newton, Alexander Fleming), and entertainers (Harry Houdini, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Borgnine, Clark Gable, Richard Pryor) have practiced Freemasonry, there is scant verifiable evidence that the organization itself is pulling the strings of global power, despite the claims of numerous conspiracy theorists. Today, these are all over the internet, but they have existed for centuries, and they are often intertwined

with other conspiracy fare, such as the time-worn allegation about an international Jewish plot to control the world.<sup>2</sup>

The focus on Masonic secrecy can be found in academic texts in addition to popular media. There are only a handful of ethnographies on the Masons, one of which is Lilith Mahmud’s “‘The World is a Forest of Symbols’: Italian Freemasonry and the Practice of Discretion.” Grounded in 21st-century Italy, that ethnography explores “the epistemology of secrecy that shapes the worldviews, knowledge, practices, and aesthetics of one of the most famous and romanticized of ‘secret societies’” (Mahmud 2012: 426). Following in the tradition of the British anthropologist Victor Turner (the title of her ethnography is a nod to his 1967 book) and American anthropologist Clifford Geertz, the ethnographer focuses on the Freemasons’ internal semiotics and how understanding various layers of symbolic meaning helps them make sense of their lived social worlds (Mahmud 2012: 426).

While many non-Masons consider the fraternity a secret society, most Freemasons reject this label.<sup>3</sup> They typically mention that many brothers wear their Masonic affiliation proudly on a ring, necktie, or magnetic car medallion—for all to see. Masonic lodges often march in town parades, and they are otherwise visible as active members of the community: hosting Girl Scout meetings in their lodges, sponsoring local scholarships, and serving food at “community dinners.” A 2007 pamphlet distributed by the Grand Lodge of New York,<sup>4</sup> which seeks to answer the public’s questions about Masonry, responds to the accusation of being a secret society with: “The goals and aims of

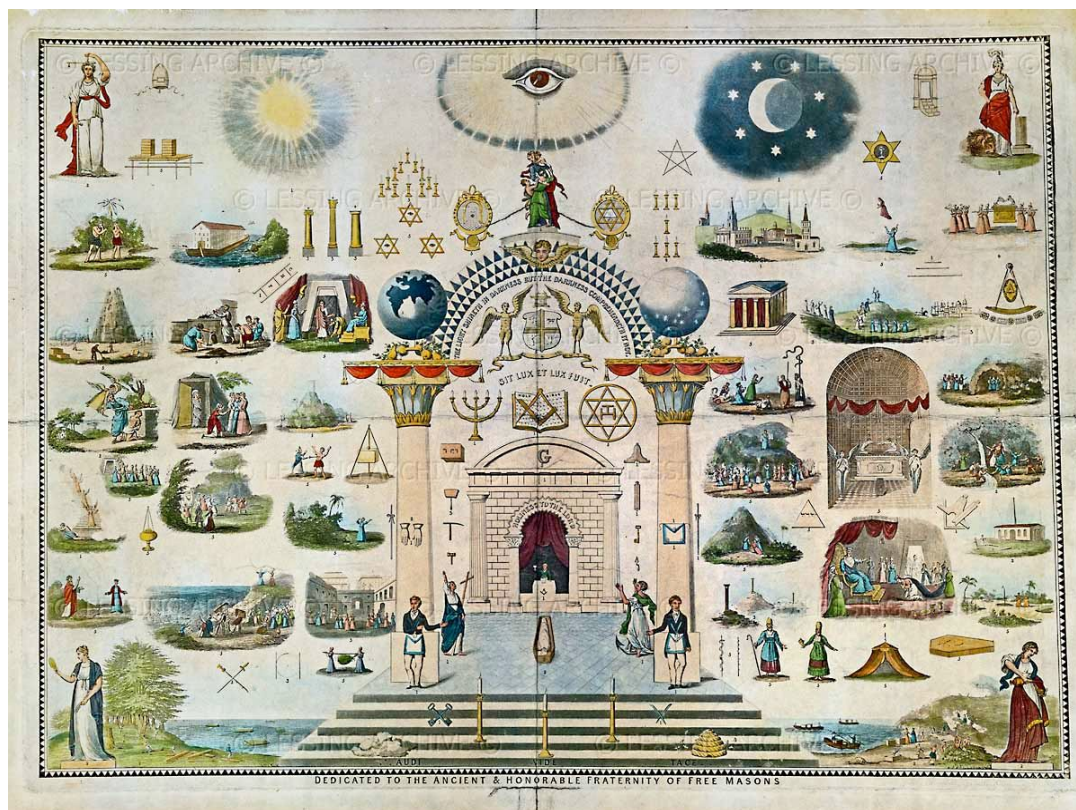
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<sup>2</sup> Many of these trace their modern roots to the 1903 publication of a fabricated document called *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is purportedly a plan for Jewish and Masonic domination.

<sup>3</sup> Many sincerely reject charges of secrecy, but a few Masons I know have fun with it, often winking as they play coy.

<sup>4</sup> Grand Lodges have jurisdiction over every mainstream lodge in their state.

Freemasonry are available to the public,” even though their meetings are “held in private” (Grand Lodge of New York 2007).



*Print containing numerous Masonic symbols. Unknown artist and date.*

Secrecy plays a prominent role in many Masonic canons, and the accompanying aesthetics can be quite captivating to a wide range of audiences. Objects are given new meanings, which become leitmotifs in numerous mythic narratives as a Mason advances through the degrees, “concordant bodies” and independent studies. The search for some kind of deeper meaning is also undeniably attractive. But for the Masons I know, and probably many others in the U.S., it seems that the focus on secrecy comes from the outside, so perhaps their internal tapestry of symbols is not as ethnographically relevant as it might seem. When asked, a lot the Masons I’ve met didn’t say that they joined the fraternity to learn their symbols or get in on their secrets. They mostly talked about friendship, which is often expressed over card games, barbeque dinners, serving their

community, “getting in touch with history,” becoming “better men,” or otherwise just hanging out. It’s possible that their current relationship with the fraternity has colored their retrospection, but they seldom use Masonic gestures in their everyday social interactions. As such, I have focused this ethnography on everyday socializing and what is important about Masonry to Masons.

### **Who Are the Masons?**

Freemasonry is a decentralized collection of fraternal organizations that can be found in nearly every country in the world.<sup>5</sup> In both the United States and other “regular”<sup>6</sup> jurisdictions around the world, much of the fraternity’s ideology and philosophy draws from the Judeo-Christian biblical tradition,<sup>7</sup> along with the European Enlightenment and the cosmopolitanism that accompanied it, as discussed below. Freemasons refer to themselves as “speculative Masons” and their own organizations as places that metaphorically “build” moral men. This distinguishes them from the craftsmen who build with stone, whom they refer to as “operative Masons.”<sup>8</sup> Numerous Masonic symbols, like the level and plumbline, have been appropriated from their operative brothers, and the connection to the physical craft is essential to their mythic identity. There is also some materialist historical precedent for this, although it doesn’t stretch as far back as claimed by many Masonic ritual texts or foundational documents. A number of historians have located Freemasonry’s emergence in the late 17th- and early 18th-century in Scotland and England, when a few stonemason guilds began to admit non-craftsmen members (Jacob 2006: 5, Bullock 1996: 25,

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<sup>5</sup> While their globality seems to add a shred of credence to the international Masonic conspiracy, it is important to note that Masonic lodges certainly do not move in lock-step, and there are many disagreements between lodges.

<sup>6</sup> There is no globally centralized regulation of Masonic lodges, but “regularity” is a system of recognition between lodges that allows members from one lodge to visit other lodges. Conversely, irregular or “clandestine” lodges, are consistently denounced by regular Masons, and many have been accused of fraud.

<sup>7</sup> Masonic lore situates the brotherhood’s origins in the biblical era, and their degree rituals are an interpretation of King Solomon’s Temple from the Old Testament.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout this ethnography, I often refer to Freemasons as ‘Masons,’ and I’ll always indicate when I’m speaking of the operative type.

26). In his book *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, historian Steven C. Bullock argued that the connection to the ancient world, as espoused by these stonemason guilds, was quite attractive to these new guys, as was the prospect of a social club where thoughtful men conversed, gave lectures, proposed a toast, celebrated, drank, and maybe over indulged (Bullock 1996: 28). While much has changed in 300 years, some of these essential elements are still present today, at least in my experience.

Besides being the buildings themselves, Masonic “lodges” are the basic fundamental unit of the fraternity, and they can be found in nearly every city and in most small towns in the United States. Each state has its own Grand Lodge, which oversees the lodges within that district. There is also considerable diversity among lodges, and they take on the characteristics of the populations in which they’re located. Some are more religious, others more civic-minded; some are historically Black, others forbid homosexuals;<sup>9</sup> but consistently, Masonic lodges seek to foster fellowship and brotherhood within their bounded, kinship-like communities (Kaplan 2014: 83). As such, Freemasons like to refer to each other as “brothers.”

I conducted my field work at Ancient Lodge in Cedarkill, New York,<sup>10</sup> which like most lodges in the United States, is a “Blue Lodge.” But there are numerous “concordant bodies,” such as the Scottish Rite<sup>11</sup> and York Rite, that offer members various new rituals, metaphors, and layers of esoterica. The Shriners are another popular concordant body, whose members are famous for wearing fezzes and driving tiny cars in parades, but the organization is best known for its monumental volunteer work with hospitalized children. While all Shriners are Freemasons, not all Masons are Shriners.

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<sup>9</sup> I am unaware of any edicts that declare this, but from what I’ve read in the Something Awful thread (discussed below), most instances of this seem to be unofficial social exclusion, usually consisting of alienating and demeaning off-hand remarks or other tacit exclusionary behaviors.

<sup>10</sup> All names in this ethnography are pseudonyms, which is consistent with typical anthropological practice.

<sup>11</sup> The Scottish Rite is known for extravagant costumes, regalia, and extremely theatrical rituals.

In standard Blue Lodge Masonry, also known as Craft Masonry, all brothers are divided into three grades called “degrees:” Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason. Symbolically akin to the apprentice, journeyman, and master rankings in medieval guilds, the degrees represent a Mason’s progress in the fraternity’s teachings, and each one has a corresponding ritual laden with metaphors and symbols relating to that degree. Certain Masonic concepts, texts, symbols, and gestures are reserved only for Masons of a certain degree, so brothers often have to watch their tongues when in the presence of an Entered Apprentice or Fellowcraft. To attend business meetings at Ancient Lodge, one must be a Master Mason.<sup>12</sup> The vast majority of Masons are Masters, and those who are not will be soon.<sup>13</sup>

Degrees are not a hierarchical ranking system that confers power and status. All Masons are supposed to treat each other as equals, regardless of their place in society or degrees taken. This appears paradoxical because one would assume that the position of “Most Worshipful Grand Master”<sup>14</sup> would command more respect than an Entered Apprentice. But for the sake of horizontal brotherhood, this hierarchy is flattened, so a Mason who just took his first degree is supposed to be treated with the same dignity and respect as the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge.<sup>15</sup> At the end of my third degree ceremony, the Worshipful Master, who is basically the elected director of the lodge, descended from the stage to the main floor to symbolically demonstrate to us that we were all “on the level,” and equals among men. But hierarchy is still present within the lodge room (where Masons conduct their business meetings and rituals), even if everyone is ostensibly equal. Masons

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<sup>12</sup> This varies from state-to-state and lodge-to-lodge. At a few lodges in the same district as Ancient, first degree Masons can attend business meetings but cannot vote until their third degree.

<sup>13</sup> It took me about six months to become a Master Mason

<sup>14</sup> The head of a state’s Grand Lodge.

<sup>15</sup> Lodge officers, such as the Worshipful Master and Senior and Junior Wardens, are elected and not determined by one’s degree.

are instructed to salute the Worshipful Master when he directly addresses them during business meetings, and he is the only lodge officer who can give “orders.” Although every brother is apparently equal, each one has his specific place in the lodge room (as Treasurer, Secretary, Tyler, Junior and Senior Wardens and Deacons, or on the “sidelines”), and Masons are taught in the degree rituals to respect and maintain that hierarchy (Moore 2006: 13).

The division between Masons and non-Masons is rather stark. One must first be initiated to then be entrusted with various gestures and signs intended to be intelligible only to Masons. Myths, which are performed in theatrical rituals or concealed in arcane texts, explain their elaborate, esoteric symbology. If a non-Mason learns a Masonic handshake, it will be far less significant to him or her without knowing its context in the organization’s philosophy and lore. Most lodges strictly control their membership as well. A prospective Mason must be voted on by the lodge before he is granted entry, and at Ancient Lodge, three no-votes is all it takes to reject a candidate (it used to be just one).

The criteria of a good Mason is largely defined by Masonic morality, which itself is rooted in Protestantism and many of the teachings of the European Enlightenment. According to historian Margaret C. Jacob, “The Eighteenth century lodges consistently spoke about civic virtue and merit, about men meeting as equals, about the need for brothers to become philosophers, about their being ‘enlightened’” (Jacob 2007:15). And in American Masonry at least, there are many echoes of the nation’s foundational texts within Masonic beliefs and practices, such as the Declaration of Independence.<sup>16</sup> Candidates are expected to believe in a “Supreme Being,”<sup>17</sup> but also must agree upon an individual’s right to his or her own beliefs (Masonic Information Center 2005). Candidates

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<sup>16</sup> As discussed in the third chapter, a few of the ‘founding fathers’ were themselves Freemasons, and Masonic values correspond with many classic American ideals: liberty, fraternity, reason.

<sup>17</sup> This most commonly takes the form of the Judeo-Christian God, but allegedly, any theistic belief system is acceptable as long as it features a “Supreme Being” without any mental gymnastics required to classify it as such.

and Masons must also be honest, upright citizens, generous in their community, respectful of their fellow man, gentlemanly, law-abiding, convivial, and men (Masonic Information Center 2005).

Ancient Lodge is nestled on a quiet side street in Cedarkill, New York. Besides the centralized village, the small town is predominantly rural, and according to the 2010 census, 94.2% of its 11,319 citizens were white (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). Out of 3,574 households, 35.5% had children, and 56.5% were married couples (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). As previously mentioned, Masonic lodges take on the characteristics of their local populations. Thus, the vast majority of Masons at Ancient Lodge are white, and most are married with children (many of whom have already grown up and left the house).

Freemasonry has always been a middle-class institution (Bullock 1996: 138), and Ancient Lodge is no different.<sup>18</sup> While some have had professional, corporate careers—like Bill, who was an accountant in the oil industry, and Frank who was a systems analyst for IBM—other Masons' middle-class employment is more typically manual, blue-collar labor. For instance, Roger owns a power equipment store and Gerald sells tractors. Yet there are others who consider themselves working class: Wayne is a hay farmer, Felix drives an 18-wheeler, and Lenny works as an independent contractor for an arborist (and thus is denied various benefits that come with full employment). Surprisingly, I've only met one Freemason who works as a stonemason.

Most of the members of Ancient Lodge are well up in years, which is also true of most lodges today. Accordingly, death and mourning are frequent occurrences and part of the Masonic

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<sup>18</sup> The initiation fee is 200 dollars, followed by annual dues, which are currently 143 dollars. Many Masonic events, like the Table Lodge or Rewards Night, require a small fee (usually 10-30 dollars) to cover the cost of food and drinks. While many would consider this a good value (I was able to drink a lot of nice whiskey during poker games—for free—over the course of this ethnography), this pricing could be prohibitive to people with more limited incomes.



experience.<sup>19</sup> Dedicated Freemasons are usually given a Masonic funeral after the more traditional ceremony, and a black cloth is draped over the ceremonial altar in the lodge room for 30 days after a brother's death. At the first business meeting I attended, the Masons said a prayer for a departed brother after covering the altar. However, none of the Masons personally knew the deceased, but they still formally paid their respects, because he was a fellow Mason who used to be active in the lodge. I discuss this imagined community of brotherhood in greater depth in the third chapter.

Besides a 25-year-old financier named Kevin, I am by far the youngest member at 22. There are a handful of guys in their late 30s and 40s, but the bulk of the lodge's (roughly) 85 members fall somewhere between 50 and 80 years old. Over the past two decades, membership of Ancient Lodge has declined (from a peak of about 150) as brothers lapsed on their dues, rarely showed up, or died, which all coincided with a dearth of new applicants. This may not come as much of a surprise, as participation in numerous civic and social organizations has declined over the past few decades (Putnam 2000: 49). But it is also worth investigating why Masonic lodges in particular are not alluring to more young men, although I'm unsure if they ever really were.

While not part of the scope of this ethnography, I think that one possible reason for a lack of youth interest in Freemasonry is the fraternity's archaic web presence. I grew up on the web, and it informs and defines countless facets of my life (for better and for worse). So when I was looking for a field site, one of the main reasons why I chose Ancient Lodge was because it had a website. I actually live down the block from another lodge, but they didn't have any contact information publicly available on the web, so instead of waiting all week to catch someone after a meeting, I emailed the Worshipful Master of Ancient Lodge and set up a time to meet to discuss my project.

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<sup>19</sup> Two brothers at Ancient Lodge died since I started my field work. One of whom was a long-time Mason who performed in my first degree ritual.

Even though Ancient Lodge has a website, it's not pretty. It has a clunky, if utilitarian structure, and the web designer took a lot of creative liberties with his or her font choices. This isn't rare, as many Masonic websites look like they haven't been updated since the dotcom bubble. On Facebook as well, Masonic "Groups" are predictably populated by older users whose approach to social media is often out of touch with younger, more media-savvy users.<sup>20 21</sup> This reinforces the notion that Masonry is an old institution—both in its membership and as an organization.

However, I found an online Masonic community in an unlikely place: The Something Awful Forums. Launched in 1999, SA is a comedy website and forum that has spawned countless internet memes, and its biting, deeply ironic satire has tremendously influenced "internet humor" from its inception until the late 2000s.<sup>22</sup> But it's more than just making fun of anthropomorphic animal fetishists, or "furrries," and Photoshops of 9/11. In the subforum "Ask/Tell," which normally features sincere, informative threads about things like ancient Roman history, parenting, or living in a van, there is an active thread about Freemasonry. Many of the posts in the Freemason thread are by younger Masons from across the country, who compare their experiences at their respective lodges and discuss questions about Masonic beliefs and practices. A few of them are also liberal outliers in their lodges (mostly located in southern states), and they like to vent to the thread after encountering far-right politics, or even bigotry, in their home lodges. There are only a few dozen regular posters in the thread, out of only 199,000 total users of the site, so this group of people is by

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<sup>20</sup> There are numerous meme pages on Facebook, among other social media sites, dedicated to mocking elderly users' incompetent posts. For instance, the page "Please show to Jim ,, Ha Ha" is a collection of user-posts documenting older people's total misunderstanding of Facebook decorum or how the site fundamentally works (e.g. A popular post on the page is a screenshot of a middle-aged woman's status update, pleading with her followers to not email her husband after 8 p.m. because it makes his phone ring, and they don't know how to silence it).

<sup>21</sup> Although he has a Facebook profile, Bill confided in me that he's scared of the internet. "There's too much out there. All that information. I mean there's your credit card info and address, but there's everything else too. It's too much."

<sup>22</sup> Its relevance in the online comedy ecosystem has waned over the past few years, however, as many of its users grew up or migrated to Twitter.

no means an exhaustive representation of younger Masons. But perhaps it can shine a light on the experiences and desires of younger brothers, many of whom lament the fraternity's conservative bent. One user called "Colonial Air Force" is interested in the Revolutionary War, so he joined the Masons to "tie myself better to that period" (Colonial Air Force 2018), which is consistent with some of the things I've heard at Ancient Lodge. But some of the other guys in the thread joined because they were interested in the Masons' philosophy and symbology, charitable endeavors, and encouragement of personal growth (Something Awful 2018). While I have not cited any posts from this thread elsewhere in this ethnography,<sup>23</sup> I have used it as a background resource to compare Ancient Lodge with others from across the country. Also, as a Mason and Something Awful user, or "goon" as they're called, I have found it personally fulfilling to discuss my experiences of Freemasonry with other people who share these coinciding, rather niche identities—which often entail compatible political beliefs, senses of humor, or a shared media canon.

Although it is a self-fulfilling prophecy, perhaps the most obvious explanation for the lack of youth involvement is that a lot of young people don't want to hang out with "a bunch of old farts," as Bill put it, especially if there isn't a familial connection to a local lodge. But many of the members of Ancient Lodge did not join while they were young men. When I went through the degree rituals, most of the other initiates were in their 50s, and there was one guy in his late 70s or early 80s. Perhaps this is the case because what Masonry provides these guys is more attractive to someone who has had a long career, been married, and has a family. Gerald, for instance, became a Mason after his two children left the nest to go to college.

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<sup>23</sup> A closer examination of the Freemasons' use of the web will make for a fruitful ethnography. But I decided that the scope of this project should be located in the physical and discursive space of Ancient Lodge.

Over the past few years, numerous newspaper and magazine articles have been written about how challenging it is for middle-aged American men to not only retain old friendships but forge new ones as well (Baker 2017, Wells 2015). Outside of work and family life, there are few institutional outlets that foster friendship for men in this demographic, so accordingly, many of them are lonely. But Freemasonry is one of those institutions, and its structure creates fraternal bonds that are reinforced every week through a variety of shared activities: conducting business together, cooking meals, playing cards, or just goofing around. While the allure of steady friendship is one explanation, perhaps it's also true that the opportunity for self-improvement and community service becomes more enticing once an American man once he has settled down after a few decades of focusing on his career and family.

One of the most striking (and talked about) elements of Ancient Lodge is that it provides a space for men to escape their wives and the domestic sphere. Many American men consider home life, and the duties that entails, as feminine. Even though a patriarchal family structure ensures they have a masculine role, a lot of men feel smothered by it and seek escape routes (Kimmel 1996: 44). Some men establish masculine colonies in their basements or attics—dubbing them “mancaves”—where they're free to express their masculinity: watching sports, playing cards, drinking beer, and horsing around with other guys. Other men venture outward, arriving at bars, car meetups, specialty shops, or Masonic lodges.<sup>24</sup> Ancient Lodge, for instance, fosters a space where men can “blow off steam,” in Gerald's words, and where they don't have to censor themselves due

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<sup>24</sup> While Masonic lodges provide an escape from the family and the home, the vast majority of Masons consider family more important than the lodge. Prospective Masons are discouraged from joining if their wives do not support it, or if the lodge believes that membership will interfere with their home lives in some other way. So while Masonry encourages a man to leave the home from time-to-time, it fundamentally supports the institution of the nuclear family.

to the presence of women. Perhaps many younger, non-married men do not feel the same impetus to escape to masculine spaces like Masonic lodges.

Many Masons believe that relationships between men and women are incompatible with fraternal, Masonic relationships. One reason is that a sincere, convivial Masonic friendship is conceived as being between two equals with similar roles and places within society. A lot of what the Masons do is hanging out, and the structure and rhetoric of the fraternity explicitly encourages the expression of brotherly love. The idealized form of that relationship is between cisgender, heterosexual men who are free to express their feelings about one another without the spectre of seeming weak or feminine. But as one might expect of masculine American men, a level of reservation can still be present when brothers express their feelings to each other.

For instance, Bill recounted when the Worshipful Master gave a eulogy at the funeral for a deceased brother, and he started to “get goofy.” Bill never said that he cried or was overcome by emotion, just that he “got goofy.” And a couple months later at a business meeting, the same Worshipful Master asked one of the lodge officers how he was feeling when they were taking stock of any brothers, or their family members, who have been ill or “in distress.”<sup>25</sup> With some trepidation, the officer said he didn’t really know, and the Master responded, “Well, I certainly think it’s true that it’s not always good to keep your feelings inside all the time. So whenever you need us, your brothers are here for you. Just give me a call.” Here, the Master tried to push back against the stereotypically masculine behavior of suppressing one’s emotions and denying their existence to others, but he did so without sounding mushy or stereotypically feminine. It is notable though, that

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<sup>25</sup> It was never clarified what the officer was feeling about, but the implication of the ensuing conversation leads me to believe that this was an emotional, as opposed to a physiological, feeling.

Masonry is one of the few spaces available to middle-aged men that encourages them to express their feelings outside of the home.

In Masonic lodges that follow in the British tradition, such as in the U.S., the lodge room has always been intended to be a space devoid of divisions caused by political, religious, gender, or national differences. When Freemasonry emerged in Post-Restoration England, the nation was rife with political and religious tensions. The question of Queen Anne's succession sustained an unprecedented rivalry between the Whigs and Tories, and in the wake of the wars with Catholic France, the Protestant Anglican church sought complete obedience and total legitimacy (Bullock 1996: 32). These tensions could easily destroy the early Masons' goal of a universal brotherhood, thus these topics were banned from the lodge room in the 1723 *Constitutions* (Bullock 1996: 32), a foundational text of the fraternity written by Scottish writer and minister James Anderson that is used as the rule and guide in every mainstream lodge in the U.S., Britain, Australia, Israel, and many others outside of continental Europe (Kaplan 2014: 83, 84).

Today in Ancient Lodge, we still do not talk about religion. They don't bring it up, and it would be gauche to ask. The vast majority are Protestant, usually Episcopalian or Methodist, and there is another Jew or two besides me. But there has been tension between Catholics and Masons for centuries. Margaret C. Jacob writes, "When the Catholic Church condemned lodge membership in 1738 it objected that Freemasonry constituted a new form of religion. It also condemned frequent elections as being republican. For some men freemasonry expressed new beliefs that were tolerant and endorsed practices ultimately at odds with traditional religiosity and monarchical absolutism" (Jacob 2007: 18). Not much has changed since. According to *Catholic Answers*, a lay-run outreach organization with permission from the Diocese of San Diego, "Freemasonry is incompatible with

the Catholic faith...[because] it is a parallel religion to Christianity” (Catholic Answers Staff 2011). This isn’t that surprising, as the Vatican has asserted that it is the ‘one true church’ for over a thousand years, and scores of religious wars have been fought over this principle. *Catholic Answers* also declares Freemasonry a “secret society,” and it claims that “[i]ts initiates subscribe to secret blood oaths that are contrary to Christian morals,”<sup>26</sup> with the primary objective of destroying the Catholic Church (Catholic Answers Staff 2011). According to that website, Catholics can be excommunicated for joining the Freemasons as stated in their “code of canon law” (Catholic Answers Staff 2011). While there have certainly been a few Catholic Masons throughout history, I don’t know any at Ancient Lodge, but then again, I haven’t asked.

While personal religious beliefs are seldom, if ever, discussed—politics come up from time to time, often in the lodge basement (which is notably distinct from the lodge room in physical form and telos). It would be unrealistic to require a group of friends to never discuss the system of resource distribution—and the spectacular theatrics used to describe it—that defines their lives. During poker games, for instance, some of guys have made off-hand comments that imply some level of agreement with a few of President Trump’s statements. They’re often brief, though, and I haven’t heard them argue or discuss politics at any appreciable length. One night over cards, Roger asked us what we thought of Trump’s recent speech, and one of the guys said “it was very pro-America,” and we left it at that. When I was over at his house one afternoon, Bill expressed his concern over the MS-13 street gang—which is neither present nor a tangible threat in the greater

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<sup>26</sup> When candidates swear an obligation to the fraternity during the initiation, they “bind [themselves] under the ancient penalty” of a rather elaborate, gruesome death should they ever reveal Masonic secrets (Masonic Lodge Publication. 2013. “Lecture 1.”). A candidate who joined to find out about the Masons’ occult activity would be seriously disappointed however, as there is no literal bloodletting in the ceremony. It is often repeated that this is symbolic, but one time as we were going over the ritual text, Bill winked at me and said “it wasn’t always symbolic, though,” which I can neither confirm nor deny.

Cedarkill area but is a popular dog whistle used by Trump and right-wing media figures to stoke fear of violent, undocumented immigrants. Bill joked that he only reads the sports page of the *New York Post*, and while that is the only thing I know about his news media consumption, he has credited his knowledge of MS-13's brutality to a relative or in-law in the Drug Enforcement Administration. He's not a cookie-cutter conservative or bellicose firebrand. He expressed his disillusionment with and subsequent withdrawal from politics to me: "I've come to accept it, that I, myself, can't make a change in it. I mean, voting is important of course, you gotta vote, but it's out of my hands," he shrugged.

At a local community dinner, I overheard one of my friends tell a local political candidate, who stopped by to eat and shake hands, that the lodge doesn't endorse any candidates, but that most of the guys vote Republican. Indeed, many in the lodge believe in picking oneself up by one's bootstraps, that couples should eventually marry, that individuals have the right to bear arms (many of them are hunters), and that small business owners are—and should continue to be—the backbone of American society. And while it's certainly true that today's Republican party has become extremely right wing, the tone of the Masons' political rhetoric is more akin to the George W. Bush-era Republicans, in that they ostensibly support equality and access to the American dream for all people, irrespective of race, class, gender, or ability.<sup>27</sup> But in the Trump era, outlandish conspiracy theories and brazen white nationalism have crept into banal conservative discourse, so it's important to distinguish people who want tax cuts and a thriving American manufacturing

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<sup>27</sup> It's true that white supremacy undergirds practically every Republican policy, but most conservative politicians don't openly admit that.



sector, from those who believe that Hillary Clinton and John Podesta ran a child sex trafficking ring out of a D.C. pizza parlor.<sup>28</sup>

The Masons' conservative nationalism is perhaps best exemplified in their veneration of the military and veterans. A handful of the brothers of Ancient Lodge have served in the military, and even those who haven't believe that American soldiers should be respected and supported for risking their lives in service of the nation. Down in the lodge basement, a framed print—adorned with an American eagle clutching a talonful of arrows—lists the lodge's members who have fought in foreign wars. Many of the guys keep service members in their prayers, and I've heard a handful of off-hand comments about needing to support the troops. While I haven't had a chance to discuss this with any of the guys, perhaps a Masonic lodge provides veterans a masculine and fraternal social structure similar to what they experienced in the military, but found absent in other areas of civilian life.

### **Ethnography in Ancient Lodge**

I hung out with the Freemasons of Ancient Lodge for about a year: volunteering at community dinners, playing poker, and becoming a Mason myself. I underwent the rite of passage, rose to the degree of "Master Mason," and lost a lot of money at cards. This ethnography would have had an entirely different scope if I remained a profane outsider, however. When I first started hanging out with them for a mini-ethnography for an anthropological methods course, a few of them were "quite skeptical" of me or otherwise concerned about my presence, at least according to

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<sup>28</sup> This conspiracy theory is known as "Pizzagate." I won't go into it here, but it's astonishingly elaborate, and many online conspiracy theorists take it extremely seriously. In 2016, an armed man burst into the pizza shop accused of harboring child sex slaves to investigate their alleged crimes, and he eventually fired a rifle at the ceiling before being arrested.

one of my friends at the lodge. After learning that, I took great care to explain to the guys that my project was not about their secrets, but instead about normal, everyday behavior.

I may well be the first Bard student to become a Mason at Ancient Lodge, and with bleached blonde hair, painted fingernails, and a reporter's notebook, I initially felt out of place. When I first arrived, many of them were friendly, but seemed put off by my notebook (so I abandoned that practice in favor of writing notes on my phone). But once I announced my intention of becoming a fellow Mason, I was welcomed with open arms. And it was a legitimate desire; I have fun hanging out with those guys, and I think Masonic lore is pretty neat, especially in a historical context. But becoming a Mason, and sincerely wanting to be one, signaled to them that this was not a study from the outside or an invasive exposé. Without that access, I would have been unable to speak to what Ancient Lodge actually does, because Masonic practices have varied so widely in form and content across place and time.

Subsequently, the various theories within this ethnography have been shaped by my field work: documents are a mediating form of communication in the lodge that reveal its bureaucratic structure; Masonic equality is predicated on exclusion; different masculinities are performed in different spaces within the lodge; while gender is performatively constituted and fluid, it is still constrained by other social structures; Masonry can be thought of as an imagined community with a sense of time that mimics both the nation and pre-national religions; and national and familial histories are intertwined with the brotherhood.

### **What Comes Next**

The first chapter covers the initiation process. It begins with an analysis of the first degree ritual as a rite of passage, as defined and used by Victor Turner. I proceed to examine two separate

documents and their role in the initiation process: the Petition and the North Star Program. The Petition is filled out by a prospective Mason, and by signing it, he has indexically signified an act of free will. Petitions are often used to demand certain things from states or governing bodies, so the form of this Masonic Petition indicates that the lodge functions bureaucratically, or somehow similar to a state. The North Star Program is used to inform prospects of the history, practices, and goals of Freemasonry, but it also reveals much of the fraternity's philosophical underpinnings, like the importance of free will and the quest for enlightenment.

In chapter two, I explore Masonic equality, positing that it's predicated on exclusion: of women and those deemed immoral or unseemly. These exclusions were laid out in the *Constitutions*, and they're still practiced to this day. Members believe that Freemasonry can only achieve a universal brotherhood—where they are all 'on the level'—after those less desirable populations have been prohibited from entry. Because Masons must be men, I examine what their sociality looks like in some detail, and I divide the lodge into three separate spaces to analyze different kinds of masculine performances observed in each, which seem to conflict at times.

The final chapter explores how the Masons imagine their global community in the final chapter, and I relate that to their sense of history. "History" is often invoked in the lodge, and many brothers cite it as one of the reasons why they first got involved in the fraternity. Accordingly, I parse out what those histories consist of, which are primarily familial, national, and that of the fraternity itself. Many Masons and non-Masonic historians have posited that early American history, particularly around the Revolutionary War era, is intertwined with Masonry (Bullock 1996); many of the 'founding fathers' were Masons, and many of their ideals—as laid out in the nation's foundational texts—bare strong similarities to Masonic teachings. While I interact with that

discourse, I primarily focus on how that narrative affects Masons' conception of the United States, Masonry itself, and the rest of their lives.

## *Chapter I: Initiation and the Role of Documents*

The initiation ceremony, or first degree ritual, is fundamental to Freemasonry, and analyzing how one becomes a Mason should elucidate the organization's belief system and what it means to them. This transitional event is how otherwise disparate men become brothers in the eyes of the fraternity, and by completing it, an initiate has sworn to uphold an obligation to the brotherhood. Similar to a hazing ritual in a Greek Fraternity,<sup>29</sup> this initiation binds Freemasons together through a shared transitional experience, where they emerge from the liminal zone as a brother.

As soon as I arrived (late) to my first degree, I was immediately ushered into an anteroom adjacent to the lodge room. Inside, two middle-aged, blue collar guys stood beside a heavy-set Mason named Hank, whom I had previously met at a lodge barbeque. I introduced myself to the strangers, who were fellow initiates Felix and Virgil. Hank grinned and asked us if we remembered to wear clean underwear. Luckily I had, because he told me to strip down to my drawers, leave any metallic objects in my jacket, and put on my outfit for the evening. After removing my blazer, and regretting how much time I wasted watching YouTube videos on how to tie a tie, I stepped into what felt like a pair of scratchy white pajamas and a cape. The pajamas were cuffed above the left knee, and the cape exposed my left breast. I was also given a single sandal for my right foot. After draping a hangman's noose, or "cable tow," around my neck, Hank blindfolded me and the other two initiates.

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<sup>29</sup> There is no hazing, humiliation, or violence in a Masonic initiation.

“Just remember guys, we’ve *all* been through this, even George Washington. So don’t worry,” Hank assured us. After we gave him the ‘okay,’ he knocked thrice on the door leading into the lodge room.<sup>30</sup>

“Who comes here?” came through the other side. This question, like every other memorized bit of dialogue from the ritual’s script, was stated in formal, archaic language, signaling that we were perhaps no longer in our present era.

As instructed earlier by Hank, we responded “One in darkness, who wishes to approach the light.” We then slowly entered the room and a Mason took each of us by our right arms to guide us. Based on his deep, metered breathing, I could immediately tell Bill was my “conductor.”<sup>31</sup> We were led around the room, presumably in circles, which was rather disorientating. Occasionally, a lodge officer instructed us to face left, and asked us if we were men “acting of our own free will and accord.” Besides verifying that we were not women, this question also ensured that we were of “lawful age”<sup>32</sup> and not children.

On multiple occasions, Masons addressing us committed a faux pas by referring to us with the title of “brother,” which at that point in the ritual, we had not yet earned. At this point, our position in the lodge was actually quite ambiguous. When the Senior Warden addressed me as “brother Hayden Hard,” I heard Bill muttering “no, no no,” under his breath, and when it happened again, Bill snapped “Mr.! It’s still Mr. Hayden Hard!”

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<sup>30</sup> Later, Bill told me that one of us should have knocked and not Hank, and that this takes away some of the impact of the ritual.

<sup>31</sup> The conductor’s duty is to physically lead the candidate during the ritual—making sure he doesn’t bump into something and assuring the candidate that he is in good hands.

<sup>32</sup> The age requirement has changed over time, and it varies state-to-state. At Ancient Lodge, prospective Masons must be at least 18 years old, but it was 21 a few years ago.

After confirming that I was acting of my own free will and accord for the third time, I was led to an altar, and instructed to kneel before it on my bare knee. “Now put your other foot perpendicular to it,” Bill whispered. Once planted, my splayed hips ached in that awkward angle. A massive leather-bound bible lay on the altar, and we placed our hands upon it. I took a few deep breaths to preserve my increasingly strained balance. The room smelled like old men: musky, yet dry. I delicately fondled the bible’s thin pages and discovered a metal Square and Compass. The cool material and fine etchings on the pieces felt nice, and it was quite satisfying to fiddle with. But I accidentally rearranged the specific orientation of these symbolic tools, so a Mason promptly adjusted how they sat on the bible and where intersected with each other.

We then swore our “obligation” to the brotherhood, essentially promising not to reveal Masonic secrets,<sup>33</sup> by repeating a series of phrases back to the speaker. Accordingly, I have to be coy as to what was actually said, as the punishment for betraying this obligation is a rather gruesome glossectomy that is thankfully symbolic. We kissed the bible, and suddenly, the blindfold was ripped off my face, and my pupils ached as light flooded in. I found myself in the center of the lodge room, surrounded on all sides by my new brothers. The Master Mason approached us and presented us with our white, lambskin aprons, and to our great relief (Felix was sweating bullets from that painful kneeling position), he let us stand in a more comfortable position. As we tied the garments around our waists, he explained that the Masonic apron sets us apart from all other men, and the apron of the Entered Apprentice is pure and unsullied like a newborn lamb. We were then led back into the anteroom, where we changed back into our street clothes, tied the aprons over our jackets, and returned to the lodge room for a lecture on what just happened. After the whole affair, we were

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<sup>33</sup> While I have described details of the ritual here, I have not revealed any of the signs or gestures that are only entrusted to Masons and could let a non-Mason enter a lodge meeting.

given Masonic Bibles (that I will use as a citation tool throughout this ethnography), which are King James editions that include an index of Masonic concepts and where they are referenced in the scriptural text. Even though Masonry is ostensibly trans-religious, the organization's core texts are still rooted in the Judeo-Christian Bible, and this particular edition is used as an authoritative text on Masonic beliefs.

One can think of becoming a Mason as a rite of passage, as defined by Victor Turner in his 1969 book *The Ritual Process*. Citing Arnold van Gennep's 1909 book *The Rites of Passage*, Turner defines rites of passage as "rites which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age" (Turner 1969: 94). He continues, claiming that all rites of passage contain three phases: separation, margin, and aggregation (Turner 1969: 94). A person undergoing a rite of passage is first detached from an "earlier fixed point in the social structure [and/or] from a set of cultural conditions" (Turner 1969: 94). He or she then enters an ambiguous liminal period, with few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state (Turner 1969: 94). Finally, the ritual subject is reincorporated in a new, clearly defined social category (Turner 1969: 95).

Upon entering the anteroom for the first time, I removed the clothes I wore as a profane non-Mason, and I was separated from my past self. After donning the ritual garb, I entered into the liminal phase. I was not yet a Mason wearing an apron, but I was no longer a stranger in tweed and broadcloth. Plus, the costume itself symbolizes liminality rather obviously. The right side of my body was clothed, while the other side was nude (well, mostly). I wore a shoe on my right foot, and my left was bare. This was referenced throughout the ritual, as we were described as "neither naked nor clothed, and neither barefoot nor shod." Our clothing signified our awkward straddling of categories, and we only emerged on the other side after we tied our aprons around our waists. The



Masons say that the lambskin apron is still white and pure because it has yet to be dirtied by work, but the lamb is also a prominent symbol throughout the bible, often connoting “innocence and purity” (Stauffacher and Roney 1991: 58). By donning the white lambskin apron, perhaps we were reborn, and our old, profane selves had died. Thus, we were between death and resurrection during the ritual.<sup>34</sup>

We entered the lodge room in utter darkness, corporeally reified by our blindfolds. According to the Masons, this darkness symbolized our ignorance of The Craft, which is represented by “the light” (Stauffacher and Roney 1991: 56). And for Turner, darkness is often associated with liminal phases (Turner 1969: 95). As we blindly moved around in circles, we were occasionally grounded by the question of whether or not we were acting of our own free will, but after answering, we returned to the turbulent disorientation of darkness. We were in the throes of the liminal phase, and in the words of Turner, “neither here nor there” (Turner 1969: 95). But the question as to whether or not we were acting of our own free will appears paradoxical, because our movements were guided by Masons: when we were told to face left, we faced left. While nobody would have stopped an initiate from running out of the room, our corporeal orientation was highly controlled by others. Turner can help make sense of this contradiction. Referring to neophytes in a rite of passage, “Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly...It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life” (Turner 1969: 95). If one applies this to Masonry, then the individualism that coincides with

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<sup>34</sup> This observation was later confirmed upon my completion of the next two degrees, as a central part of the ritual text of King Solomon’s Temple involves resurrection.

free will must be temporarily neutralized for a man to become a part of the lodge, which functions as a body politic.

Only after swearing the obligation had we exited the liminal phase and become Masons. To symbolize this transformation, our blindfolds were removed for us to see the light. Our new social position was clearly defined: We were brothers, just like everyone else in the room.

### **The First Step**

To become a Freemason at Ancient Lodge, a “prospect” must first ask (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 2). It is not a dynastic organization, so a Mason’s son must go through the same process as everybody else. His father won’t even ask him to join, because at Ancient Lodge and beyond, a prospect’s request must be an individual decision made of his own volition. A prospective Mason should not be coerced or pressured into the brotherhood, primarily because he won’t learn and internalize Masonic teachings *for* himself. According to one of my friends at the lodge, “Masonry is what you make of it,” so one is responsible for what he puts in and gets out of it.

The rest of this chapter focuses on two documents that Masons regularly use during the initiation process: the “Petition” and the North Star Program, which articulate a Masonic ideology that is predicated on free will, and one performs free will (in a manner that is legible as such) by interacting with these documents. Freemasons also interact with broader social institutions and structures, such as bureaucracy and masculinity, through their use of documents. As such, I’ve decided to focus on these texts, as opposed to the Masons’ symbology more broadly, because they give the reader an astute glimpse at the ideological substrates undergirding this institution.

## The Petition

After a prospect has officially asked, one of the senior members of the lodge gives him a “Petition,” which asks for one’s name, birth date and place, occupation, prior felony convictions, reputable references, and whether or not one believes in a “Supreme Being” and the “immortality of the soul” (Grand Lodge State of New York “Petition”). The top of the Petition I received states,

The undersigned, not being influenced by improper solicitation, mercenary, selfish or other unworthy motives, and prompted by a favorable opinion of and a desire for knowledge of, The Ancient and Honorable Institution of Free and Accepted Masons, freely and voluntarily makes application to be a candidate to receive the Degrees of Freemasonry, respectfully petitions the above named lodge for initiation and advancement, promising cheerful conformity to the ancient usages and established customs of the Order, and upon his honor has answered the following questions truthfully and in his handwriting and no other” (Grand Lodge State of New York “Petition”).

The language of this excerpt is reminiscent of a legal text, and as discussed throughout this chapter, this indexically signifies an official quality to the document, and it implies that the lodge functions bureaucratically. Because this custom is supposedly “ancient,” bureaucracy is implied to be as well. Delving into the content of the text, one can see the important roles that personal agency and rational decision making play in Freemasonry. The Masons believe that a man performs his free will by writing in his own handwriting, which is a direct expression one’s body and autonomy, akin to one’s voice. Thus a word written by hand indexically signifies something intimate about the person who wrote it, unlike type, which neutrally and anonymously signifies the word itself. Francis Cody discusses similar ideas in his 2009 article “Inscribing Subjects to Citizenship.” In it, the anthropologist follows a group of neo-literate Indian women from the rural Tamil region as they write and sign a petition to their district collector. Their newly-acquired handwriting signified their personal agency to the collector, which was then intelligible to the state because it took the form of a

bureaucratic document. They must perform agency to be recognized as subjects, which in turn constitutes them as such (Cody 2009).

In a Masonic lodge, one must perform agency (free will) to be recognized as a subject (brother), and one way of performing agency is to fill out the lodge's Petition in one's own handwriting. While a Masonic lodge is not a governing body, it still recognizes and communicates with itself using official bureaucratic documentation, be it a constitution, business meeting minutes, or a Petition. According to Cody, "Bureaucratic writing in particular is often stripped of certain forms of indexicality that would entail affective ties...[and it shuts] out the entry of any complications from social context" (Cody 2009: 356). Thus, the Petition itself takes on a neutral, universal quality that sharply contrasts with the hyper-individual signature of the applicant. By signing, a man becomes part of the unified body that can speak as one neutral entity, which is unencumbered by clashes of individuality. As I will discuss later in this chapter, a prospective Mason forfeits a degree of the personal agency he just performed by signing a social contract, both literally and metaphorically, wherein he takes on new responsibilities to his brothers and his community.

### **The North Star Program**

For most of the fraternity's history, Masons were often already familiar with a prospect. He may be a regular customer at a Mason's butcher shop or on the same ball team as another Mason's son. But with the advent of the internet and the loosening of community ties in the United States (Putnam 2000: 19), the "North Star Program" was developed to help prospects know what they're getting into and lodges know who is coming in.<sup>35</sup> According to one of the guys at Ancient Lodge,

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<sup>35</sup> It was first developed by the Grand Lodge of Minnesota, and Ancient adopted it in 2014. In late 2017, Ancient Lodge passed an edict requiring all new members to undergo the North Star Program and background check. Previously, it was at the lodge's discretion.

the North Star Program is necessary because “the world is so screwy now. We don’t know who a prospect is; he could be a terrorist for all we know.”

Physically, the program is a 32 page document, and it’s basically a guide for a series of over-the-phone and in-person conversations between a Mason representing the lodge and a prospective member. The program also includes a questionnaire and a brief history of the brotherhood. No specific author is attributed to the North Star Program, so the document takes on the quality of a religious text or some other kind of official document, wherein the contents transcend any one man’s pen. Even though it may only apply to a few jurisdictions, the document intends to speak for the entire brotherhood, and it codifies the ideals and values within it—free will, enlightenment, and service—as officially Masonic.

I actually did the process out of order by asking for a Petition before starting the North Star Program.<sup>36</sup> According to the text, a prospect is given the opportunity to ask for a Petition at the end of the first in-person meeting (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 6). But before I asked for a Petition, I had written a brief ethnography about Ancient Lodge for an anthropological methods course, so I knew most of the guys from playing poker a few times and helping out at a community dinner or two. This made my position in the lodge rather ambiguous, because I wasn’t a stranger, but none of them knew me outside of those few interactions. Thus, it seemed appropriate for me to undergo the North Star Program, be it an abbreviated version.

Roughly a week after I submitted my Petition, I sat down with Bill at his house to go through the process.<sup>37</sup> He’s a friendly guy in his 70s with wisps of alabaster hair and piercing blue

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<sup>36</sup> I don’t know how rare or common it is to do the program in this fashion.

<sup>37</sup> Bill went on to become my “mentor” (and good friend). I visited him once a week for a few months so he could teach me how to memorize the ritual text for the next two degree ceremonies. That text is written in a non-standard code, so initiates need to be actively taught how to read it.

eyes. Ceramic angels and gnomes guard the flower garden in front of his white, single-story ranch house. Once inside, I took off my shoes so as not to track mud onto the wall-to-wall shag, and I placed them next to his boots on a muddy old issue of the *New York Post*. I shook Bob's hand and asked "how the hell" he was doing.

"Well, I finally got a decent night's sleep, given the circumstances," he answered.

"What are the circumstances? Insomnia?"

"No, no. My wife has dementia; her mind is gone," he said while blowing a raspberry and twirling his pointer finger next to his head. "Living here is a *hell*, I tell ya." It now made sense why Bill always remarked how good it felt to get out of the house when he sat around the poker table, drinking scotch and hanging out with his friends. Due to his wife's condition, he can't leave her alone for long, so the time he allocates for the Masons is one of his few respites.

We reclined in a couple 'ez' chairs, and Bill handed me a glass of Jameson and a packet entitled "The North Star Program," embossed with a pixelated seal of the Grand Lodge of New York. The North Star Program is supposed to be three to four conversations or meetings spread over a couple weeks, but because I already had a relationship with the lodge, we did it all in one sitting. There are parts of the packet that are intended for the Mason, while other sections are to be penciled in by the prospect. But Bill just gave me everything all stapled together. When we met, we skipped over a few of the conversation guides because they seemed redundant. But, after reading over the North Star Program again, I think it's a rich primary source that can elucidate some of the Freemasons' beliefs and practices.

The beginning of the packet includes instructions for the Mason on how to respond to someone who has contacted the lodge and is curious about becoming a brother. Before setting up a

face-to-face meeting, the guide advises the Mason to inquire into what the candidate knows about Freemasonry and what their expectations and intentions are for joining. The guide also states in capital letters, “DO NOT TRY TO SELL ANYONE ON THE CRAFT” (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 3).<sup>38</sup> Proselytizing is antithetical to The Craft, and the process of ‘selling’ it to someone implies that the ‘customer’ needs to be convinced, and that the ‘seller’ has something to gain by doing so. If a man was ‘sold’ Masonry, or in anyway convinced to join, his decision would not be of his own free will and accord.

Because the exercise of free will is so important to Masons, informed and affirmative consent undergirds many of the following questions for the prospect posed by the North Star Program. After numerous statements in the packet, the candidate is asked if he understands this point, and to circle “yes” or “no” on the sheet (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 6). For the lodge, one of the primary goals of the program is to ensure that candidates know what’s necessary to rationally decide if the fraternity is worth pursuing. Here, reason is predicated on frank, honest information. But pragmatically, it would waste the lodge’s time and effort if a candidate wants to join on a lark or, as many have been led to believe by the depiction of Freemasonry in *National Treasure*, to uncover buried gold. If that was the case, it would be more than just an inconvenience. A Mason at the lodge expressed to me how heartbroken he feels when a Mason quits part way through the process. He puts himself out there and feels spurned when someone doesn’t take it seriously. So to avoid that, the candidate is asked to read and sign a questionnaire.

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<sup>38</sup> ‘The Craft’ is a Masonic term that refers to their teachings and practices, and it’s connected, both metaphorically and historically, to the profession of stone masonry (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 2).

The questionnaire concludes with, “If it all goes well, we will give you the opportunity to *ask* for a Petition. The rest is totally up to you.” Because I had already handed in my Petition, Bill told me to just ignore that point. But looking back on it now, one can see that the Masonic values of liberty and rational decision making are expressed as an invitation to the candidate, and perhaps it serves a dual purpose as a reminder to the advising Mason. The document states that if the candidate is “okay with this approach,” he is instructed to “initial [his] assent,” which like the Petition, is an expression of one’s free will through the pen.

So far, the Masonic value of free will has been teased out from the document’s form and the candidate’s relation to the document, but some of the fraternity’s values are stated more explicitly as well. The first of which I will examine is enlightenment (followed by “service”), because it plays a prominent role in Masonic discourse in the lodge and in other Masonic texts. “Freemasonry teaches no secret truths. You must be able to search and find *enlightenment* in your own mind and heart. Many Brothers feel that our Ritual, a soaring group of ideas that make up the initiation degrees of Masonry, is a tremendously effective vehicle that focuses us all on our search for enlightenment” (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 7). Enlightenment is inherently elusive and will be defined throughout this section, but Masonic enlightenment, not to be confused with any Buddhist connotations, is intensely bound up in the European ‘Age of Enlightenment.’

For the scientists, philosophers and intellectuals who participated in the 18th-century movement, reason is the primary source of authority and legitimacy, and it can be used to advance such ideals as equality, liberty, fraternity, and constitutional government.<sup>39</sup> Masonic enlightenment cannot be given; it must be pursued by an individual on a personal journey. While enlightenment can

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<sup>39</sup> One of the reasons why these seem Masonic is because many of the movers and shakers of the Enlightenment were brothers of The Craft, such as Isaac Newton, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and Benjamin Franklin.



be obtained through reason, it is not a form of external knowledge but an internal state that is discovered and experienced within one's own "heart and mind." This essentially personal endeavor is one of the reasons why it's so important that a man become a Mason of his own volition. Also, this statement emphasizes the *process* of discovering enlightenment, which echoes the unalienable right of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," as found in the United States Declaration of Independence (Jefferson 1776),<sup>40</sup> a text deeply rooted in Enlightenment ideals.

Masonic enlightenment is both an internal experience and a collective endeavor undertaken by the entire lodge. One way of working through this contradiction is by looking to an extremely influential text from the Age of Enlightenment, John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*. It was first published in 1689, and according to historian Steven C. Bullock in his 1996 book, *Revolutionary Brotherhood*, Locke's view of the self and society was incorporated by English Freemasons in the early to mid 18<sup>th</sup>-century (Bullock 1996: 38). In the *Second Treatise of Government*, the English philosopher posits that men are free and equal as individuals in a "state of nature," but the only way of protecting that liberty from those who wish to do harm is by consensually forming a community or body politic (Locke 1689: 58, 59). By joining that community, a man "puts himself under an obligation to every one of that society to submit to the determination of that majority" (Locke 1689: 59). This is not dissimilar to becoming a Mason. Any schmoe can be as ruthlessly self-interested as he wants, but a brother has an obligation and a duty to his lodge that he swore to uphold. So while a man becomes a Mason of his own free will, he sacrifices a degree of that freedom to the group: to better himself, his brothers, and his community.

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<sup>40</sup> There is much debate over whether or not Thomas Jefferson was a Mason. To my knowledge, there are no Masonic records that prove his membership (Martin 1989). Nevertheless, there are many similarities between his philosophy and the Masons', and he is often considered a brother by many Masons today, including at Ancient Lodge.

Although enlightenment is sought together by all brothers, the fruits of that pursuit are intended to extend past the walls of the lodge in the form of service. “We expect that you are seeking not only to improve yourself but also humanity through service to the community and to others. Our Fraternity is dedicated to service” (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 8). According to Bullock, Masons have done charity work since the operative era, when guilds provided aid to their members’ families and to their wider communities (Bullock 1996: 13). Today, most of the “business” that Ancient Lodge attends to are community service endeavors, which can be proposed by anyone in the lodge. Naturally, these service activities reflect the needs and lives of any given lodge’s members and their wider communities.<sup>41</sup>

In a brief history of the fraternity included in the North Star Program, three paragraphs are devoted to contemporary forms of service. The document proudly describes the Masonic Medical Research Laboratory as one of the world’s leading cardiac research facilities, where “scientists delve into the physiology of the heart, into electrical activity at the cellular level, and they isolate and identify genetic defects that contribute to cardiac arrhythmias and heart disease” (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 21). Here, the granular language portrays this Masonic endeavor as decidedly modern and thorough. While some outsiders may think of Masonic service as a well-intentioned, but low-impact, ‘meals-on-wheels’ type undertaking, the document wants to assert that they support scientific pursuits that are relevant to the hyper-specialized field of contemporary medicine. Because everybody has a heart, the Masonic Medical Research Lab’s work has the potential to be universally beneficial, and indeed, the document claims “Developments there have benefited all of humankind” (Grand Lodge State of New York “North Star Program:” 21).

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<sup>41</sup> Ancient Lodge funds local scholarships, donates money to a Masonic children’s hospital, and picks up litter on the side of the road.

Here, the scale of the community has been expanded from the local level to encompass the entire globe.

The Masons believe that the world can be improved through human action and that individuals are empowered to better themselves, their communities and their nations. This notion is predicated on free will, because the power to change the world for the better is thought to start within the individual. But if a man is indeed responsible for his actions, then he's burdened with the moral impetus to do good. This is where Masonry comes in, because it strives to act as a guide to help men make moral choices. Masonic ideology is cohesive, and many of its essential elements rely on each other. To use a Masonic metaphor, a building's roof rests upon load-bearing beams, which rest upon a foundation. Every element is essential for a complete building, but without the foundation, which in this case is free will, then nothing could stand.

## *Chapter II: Equality, Brotherhood, and Masculinities*

The Freemasons often speak of equality, but theirs is predicated on exclusion. Contemporary American Masons still closely adhere to the 1723 *Constitutions*, and according to it, all Masons must be men, “freeborn” (not born a slave), of “lawful age”, and well recommended (Anderson 1734: 49). Because Masonic exclusion is morally determined, felons are banned, as are “scandalous” men (Anderson 1734: 49). In New York state, among others, all prospective Masons must submit to a criminal background check and an examination of their social media accounts. By denying these untoward populations the privilege of becoming Masons, the brotherhood’s integrity is thought to be preserved, plus it negatively signifies Masons as good men.

When I asked Bill what Masonic equality means to him, his initial response was “You have to be a good man. We can’t just let anyone in...We’re not gonna let in lowlifes. So we’re looking at *good* men. People with high values, religious values; people that believe in right and wrong.” For Masonic equality to exist, the makeup of the fraternity must be comprised of these moral characteristics. The religious values that Bill references are presumably Judeo-Christian, as Masonic philosophy is rooted in the Old Testament, but the Masons claim to admit any religion that believes in a “Supreme Being.”<sup>42</sup> According to Bill, Masonry is built upon fellowship, and that relationship would be impossible without a shared value system.

A common reason as to why women are excluded is the normative statement that “Freemasonry is a *fraternity*.” As unsatisfying as this answer is, it implies that Masonry is built upon interpersonal relationships, and that the kinds of bonds forged by the fraternity are somehow essentially male. Many Masons believe that excluding women is necessary for their organization to

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<sup>42</sup> Hindus are theoretically acceptable, but Buddhists are not.

achieve a broad, horizontal brotherhood unencumbered by the dividing forces of race, creed, class, and national identity.

The idea that the inclusion of women would erode interracial and inter-class solidarity also played a prominent role in the European colonial project, as argued by the anthropologist Ann Stoler in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*. For much of the colonial era, European women were excluded from the colonies for a host of political, economic, and moral reasons. But they became essential for colonial authority as their presence, in practice, amplified the racial disparity between the colonizer and the colonized (Stoler 2002: 57). European women were thought to need protection from the brutish natives, who were thus heavily policed. The inclusion of white women also separated their husbands from intimate relationships with indigenous peoples (Stoler 2002: 56, 57). There are important differences between Ancient Lodge and a European colony: Masons actually want close bonds between diverse groups. Also, white women were seen as a moralizing force in the colonies (Stoler 2002: 70), but Masons believe that their organization is already moral without women. Despite these differences, the belief that women disrupt the bonds between men is consistent.

According to Gerald, there is nothing essential to women that would make them unable to be Masons. He doesn't see a good reason why "girls can't be Boy Scouts or play on a Little League team," and he believes something similar with regard to women becoming Masons. But he is cautious, because "men behave differently around women. We like to blow off steam and tell off-color jokes." If women were present at poker nights, for instance, the guys wouldn't feel comfortable having many of the conversations that they do. Thus, the definition and embodied

experiences of fraternity would need to contort for women to be an active part of Masonic relationships.

Bill was a bit more cavalier in his rejection of potential female Masons. “They’re catty!” he proclaimed. “Men and women are different. They have different kinds of relationships. Yeah they’re equal and all that, but how can you be ‘on the level’ with them?” Here, he cites a common assumption that he ostensibly agrees with: gender equality, but that equality is predicated on some kind of fundamental difference. While the former legal doctrine “separate but equal” applied to racial segregation, a similar conception of gender pervades Ancient Lodge today, which can be adequately described as *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, the title of the wildly popular 1992 book by relationship coach John Gray. One time, while broadly pontificating on ‘men and women,’ Roger said, “Well it’s like that old saying, isn’t it? Men are from Mars, and women are from Venus.” He and other members of the lodge often cite common stereotypes predicated on a natural distinction between genders: guys talk about things and facts, while women talk about people and feelings; women are better than men at communicating, but guys are better mechanically. Because these perceived differences are understood as essential, men and women cannot be equal in quite the same way. Thus, the fundamental distinctions between genders preclude women from Masonic equality. Metaphorically referring to a builder’s leveling tool, “on the level” is a Masonic expression that refers to the universal brotherhood of Freemasonry and its members’ equal status within it, and there is no room for different but equal brethren.

Ideally, all Freemasons should treat each other with as much conviviality and respect as the brothers in their home lodge. This is not only the case at Ancient Lodge, but supposedly in every

lodge across the globe.<sup>43</sup> Over a game of poker one night in the lodge basement, Bill told a story about his travels in the southern United States. Like a few other Masons from Ancient Lodge, he's a Civil War reenactor and has traveled around the country to 'fight' in the war's bloodiest battles. He said that southerners are still sore over the outcome of the war, and he's witnessed a palpable animosity towards northerners down there. When Bill attended a lodge meeting in Louisiana, he immediately felt out of place. He was wearing a suit and tie while the local guys wore t-shirts and shorts. The heat wasn't the only reason why he was sweating. But, he said, once they "got down to business,"<sup>44</sup> they treated him like one of them, as a brother.

In Danny Kaplan's 2014 ethnography "The Architecture of Collective Intimacy: Masonic Friendships as a Model for Collective Attachments," the Israeli anthropologist recounted one of his interlocutor's stories about meeting and befriending another Mason in an unlikely place. Rafi, a Mason from Tel Aviv, saw an African-American janitor wearing a Masonic ring in an airport bathroom. After they recognized each other as Freemasons, "[they] hugged and kissed and remained in touch for many years" (Kaplan 2014: 86). He was amazed that a Black American janitor was a Mason, and that he, a lawyer, befriended this stranger because they recognized each other as brothers of The Craft.

However, Kaplan is careful to balance Rafi's reverence for Masonic inclusion with the "elitist-civic morality [of] the patronizing presumption that men of certain racial, ethnic, or occupational backgrounds are less compatible with Masonic membership" (Kaplan 2014: 86). Here, the ethnographer describes Masonic brotherhood as elitist-civic because its membership has

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<sup>43</sup> While a Mason can attend a business meeting at any regular lodge, he can only vote on business decisions in his home lodge.

<sup>44</sup> Here, "business" refers to a business meeting at the lodge where Masons vote on new candidates, and attend to the tedium of running an organization: paying bills, planning events, discussing the pros and cons of purchasing a new roof or merely patching the old one.

historically consisted of public officials, businessmen, landowners, and other powerful participants in the public sphere. What's more, the brotherhood experienced between men of this demographic is exclusive to it. According to Uday Mehta in his 1990 essay "Liberal Strategies of Exclusion," this is broadly consistent with liberalism, which prides itself on inclusion and universality but has historically maintained various hierarchies that subjugate marginalized groups, which is justified by those groups' alleged inability to reason, govern themselves, or be free (Mehta 1990). While universal fraternity has the potential to transcend identity-based social divisions (except for gender), that kind of brotherhood has not always extended to *all* men, despite Masonic rhetoric.

According to one of my friends at the lodge, when the first Black man Petitioned to join Ancient Lodge sometime in the 1980s, a lot of the members were "pretty unhappy about it."<sup>45</sup> However, he was still accepted into the lodge as a brother, and he eventually rose to the third degree. My friend added, "And I told those guys, that's all horsehit. This guy's a hardworking S.O.B; I don't even see him as Black. In fact, he's become one of my very good friends." My friend tried to break down the racial barrier to see this man as a brother, but his statement about not "seeing him as Black" implies that Blackness is somehow antithetical to Masonry. By praising his work ethic, he indicated that this Black man was an exception to the stereotype of the 'lazy Black,' which would have precluded him from Freemasonry. Like Rafi in Kaplan's ethnography, a few of my friends at the lodge share the oft-unstated belief that men of certain races, classes, or occupations are less capable of being Freemasons, although they seldom articulate it that plainly.

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<sup>45</sup> In the biblical index of Masonry, "bigotry" only applies to religious differences, not ethnicities. "Masonry has always been bitterly opposed to religious intolerance of every kind. As an institution, [Masonry] has been the harbinger of religious and civil freedom, liberty of conscience, and separation of church and state" (Stauffer and Roney 1991: 48). While there is some talk of accepting men of all creeds in the text, it's not articulated in a more modern parlance to include men of different races.



Many of the older members of Ancient Lodge preface some of their statements about people of color with “I’m not a racist, but...” which ignores the structural components of racism, and it implies that being a racist is something that one is or isn’t. Within this conception of racism, one can say racially charged statements without *being* a racist. During a poker game one night, the guys were talking about President Trump’s 2018 State of the Union address, and George said “I’m not a racist: my roommate at college was Black, but after listening to the Congressional Black Caucus response to [the SOTU], it’s like, what do the Blacks *want?*”<sup>46</sup> In George’s comment, the ‘Black friend’ is a tired trope of racial discourse in America, and it implies that personal relationships can be used to prove one’s identity as a non-racist. Also, a white man referring to people of color as “the Blacks” sounds pretty bad. Besides being outmoded, the term homogenizes and dehistoricizes a vast set of communities by using a racial identifier to describe them. Black Americans’ violent entry to the United States is erased by that term, and the tremendous diversity within Black communities is subsequently ignored as people are reduced to a phenotypic signifier. But his question speaks to the larger issue of some of the guys at the lodge, and in the rest of the country, not understanding (perhaps willfully) the experiences of Black people in the United States. It also indicates an ignorance of American history more broadly—at least when told from a non-white perspective.

Due to experiences like these, and really the entire history of race in America, many men of color interested in Masonry join a Prince Hall lodge, which is a historically Black branch of Masonry founded in 1784. However, many Prince Hall lodges were not recognized by mainstream, or “regular,” Grand Lodges until fairly recently—decades after the Civil Rights Movement. “Recognition” allows two lodges to be “in amity,” which means that members from the respective

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<sup>46</sup> Some members of the caucus protested the speech with their absence, while those in attendance wore kente cloth adornments to protest the president calling several predominantly Black countries “shitholes,” in addition to many of his racially discriminatory policies.

lodges can visit the other and conduct business. While the Connecticut Grand Lodge was the first of the American Grand Lodges to recognize Prince Hall in 1989, New York only recognized them in 2001, and a few GLs in the south still refuse to be in amity with Prince Hall (Bessel 2017).

Bill once told me that a lot of Prince Hall lodges have “higher proficiency”—that is, working fluency with Masonic texts—than even Ancient Lodge, which he considers pretty good. He likened the cause of this phenomena to Prince Hall being good at “keeping out the low Blacks.” To contextualize Bill’s comment, I turn to *Middle-Class Blacks in a White Society: Prince Hall Freemasonry in America* by William A. Muraskin. The author claims that “Middle-class morality has been an influential standard for [B]lack Masons,” and that the organization has carefully selected “its potential members from the ranks of [B]lack men visibly committed to middle-class modes of thought and behavior” (Muraskin 1975: 43). A prospective Prince Hall Mason with any prior legal convictions (not just felonies) would almost certainly be rejected, and considering the discriminatory law enforcement practices in the U.S., this excludes a rather high number of potential applicants (Muraskin 1975: 44, 45). Muraskin posits that morality is largely influenced by class, so Prince Hall has implicitly excluded lower-class Blacks by requiring a strict adherence to the performance of bourgeois values (Muraskin 1975: 47). The author also posits that all of Freemasonry, not just the Prince Hall strand, is economically biased in its moral and behavioral requirements. “To successfully perform the role of responsible father and husband has required that a man at least have a steady job” (Muraskin 1975: 48). Indeed, class (along with race and gender) is one of many determining factors of who can and cannot be ‘on the level.’

## Masons and Masculinities

There is something bizarre about an all-male organization in 2018. Although there is still tremendous gender inequality in the United States, women can be found in nearly every position of power: government, business, medicine, and education—to name just a few. Besides university Greek life and all-female gyms, codified gender-exclusive spaces are hard to come by. But the Freemasons are a fastidiously masculine fraternity, particularly in the United States, where women have never been admitted to Blue Lodges. To find out why, I will begin by examining their history then comparing it to my findings in the field.

As previously mentioned, one of the most important documents for American Masons is the 1723 *Constitutions*,<sup>47</sup> which Masonic lodges use as the rule and guide for their beliefs and practices. Within a list of bylaws known as the “Masonic Charges,” the document outright forbids women’s entrance to the lodge. “The Persons admitted Members of a Lodge must be good and true Men, free-born, and of mature and discreet Age, no Bondmen, no Women, no immoral or scandalous Men, but of good Report” (Anderson 1734: 49). While the document doesn’t specify why women are banned,<sup>48</sup> their juxtaposition with slaves implies that they may not possess the same agency or capacity for reason as free men unencumbered by intemperance. The language of this text is still used today. When I recited the obligation of the third degree ritual, I pledged to never take part in the initiation of a woman or a eunuch. I’m not sure what they have against eunuchs, but it’s clear that the ritual text treats them as somehow equivalent to women. The inherent irrationality of the

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<sup>47</sup> The *Constitutions* also contains a forty-page mythic history of the Masons (from Adam, to Augustus Caesar, to King James I of England), rules of conduct for individuals and lodge officers, plus a few songs (Anderson 1734).

<sup>48</sup> The majority of Freemasons around the world recognize the Grand Lodge of England, and thus follow the *Constitutions*, but a continental European branch called the Grand Orient de France has admitted women. The two branches do not recognize each other, and because the Grand Lodge of England is the dominant sect, GODF is considered “irregular” (Jacob 2007: 92).

fairer sex remains a common trope today, but it was an unquestioned fact in Anderson's era. Accordingly, Freemasons were hardly the only organization to forbid women, as gendered segregation pervaded nearly every level of society.

When American Freemasonry took off in the 19th-century, American women were relegated to the domestic sphere, while men could freely move between that and the public sphere (Connell 2005: 252). The sociologist and feminist theorist Raewyn Connell identifies these "separate spheres" as a part of a bourgeois hegemony that recognized men and women as having essentially different "characters," which determines the physical and discursive spaces each gendered person could inhabit (Connell 2005: 252). Historian Steven C. Bullock touches on this hegemonic hierarchy, writing that 18th- and 19th-century "brothers [often] pointed to the exclusion of women from colleges and governments, noting that no one questioned that practice" (Bullock 1996: 181). Taking this into account, it would have been a severe aberration for women to become Masons at this time.

But that was over one hundred years ago, and the separate spheres have collapsed for many Americans. Or has it? With Hillary Clinton's 2016 electoral run and the rising rates of female executives, there is a popular liberal narrative that all levels of society have steadily integrated over the past few decades. But by assuming that, one ignores the lived experiences of millions of Americans, including Freemasons and their wives.

Over the course of this chapter, I will use theories by anthropologist Scott Fabius Kiesling, philosopher Judith Butler, and sociologist Michael Kimmel to inform my field work at Ancient Lodge, which can be divided into three distinct sites: the lodge room, the poker table, and the grill. In each of these spaces, masculinity is performed, reproduced, or otherwise constituted, and my analysis will pay particular attention to the similarities and disjunctures between sites.

But before visiting those sites, I will now define gender and masculinity and how I will use the work of these aforementioned theorists. Citing recent work in gender studies, Kiesling begins his ethnography on a Greek fraternity, “Now I Gotta Watch What I Say,” by positing that gender is “a fluid, cultural construction by social actors who use language to ‘do gender’” (Kiesling 2001: 250).<sup>49</sup> He incorporates fluidity into his gender analysis by focusing on the variations within “masculinities” and “femininities” that are apparent from person to person and situation to situation (Kiesling 2001: 250). In his conclusion, Kiesling complicates the theoretical notion of “infinite gender fluidity” by positing that cultural models—masculine identity, middle-class identity, fraternity identity, etc.—constrain people’s lives in practice (Kiesling 2001, 267). One way I will incorporate the anthropologist’s work is by paying close attention to how different spaces change the context of different masculinities.

Butler’s argument agrees with Kiesling’s that gender identity is constituted through performance, or “doing,” and she posits that the gendered self does not precede gendered acts (Butler 1988: 519-520). For her, gendered acts not only constitute the identity of the actor, they create an “object of belief,” which the actor and the audience reciprocally perform (Butler 1988: 520). While Kiesling primarily focuses on language, Butler expands the space of that performance from speech-acts to stylized bodily gestures, movements, and enactments in her groundbreaking essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (Butler 1988: 519). In the tradition of de-essentializing bodies, she posits that everyone is a performer, on or off stage (Butler 1988: 525, 526) and that cultural construction

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<sup>49</sup> Kiesling is a language anthropologist, and while I am examining my friends’ linguistic choices, habits, and styles, my ethnography is not ‘language anthropology.’ However, I will be closely analyzing my friends’ casual banter (like at the poker table) and the rehearsed, formal speech they exchange during rituals in the lodge room.

happens—phenomenologically—through learned performance. Because the Masons acknowledge their rituals explicitly as a performance, I will mostly reference her work when examining their rituals in the lodge room, which are dramatic events intended to be didactic lessons on how to be a better man.

To synthesize Butler’s emphasis on specific instances of performance with Kiesling’s attention to the structures that constrain it, I will use Michael Kimmel’s book *Manhood in America* to identify different cultural models of masculinity that are performed in Ancient Lodge. In the book, the sociologist traces a history of American masculinities, and he identifies various archetypes that have risen, died, clashed, yet remained as America’s economy and social structure changed.<sup>50</sup> The archetypes are certainly not universal nor do they work in every context, but they are useful here to understand various sets of idealized stances.

One of those archetypes is the Heroic Artisan, which Kimmel describes as “stiffly formal in his manners with women, stalwart and loyal to his male comrades” (Kimmel 1996: 16). Working on the family farm or in his own shop, he is “independent, virtuous...[and] an honest toiler, unafraid of hard work, proud of his craftsmanship and self reliance” (Kimmel 1996: 16). The Heroic Artisan embodies Jeffersonian values, and the pre-industrial economy of the late 18th- and early 19th-century allowed American men to own their labor, maintain workplace solidarity through guilds and fraternities, participate with their peers in local politics, and embed themselves as active members in their community (Kimmel 1996: 29, 30).

But as American society industrialized and commercialized, the identity of the Heroic Artisan came under threat by a new man on the block: the Self-Made Man. Kimmel describes the

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<sup>50</sup> While the economic context is important to understand why certain forms of masculinity succeeded as others failed, I reject the notion that economic conditions determine culture. Instead, I’ll use a model that recognizes a reciprocal relationship between economics and cultural practices, where neither determines the other.

masculinity embodied by the Self-Made Man as one that “derives identity entirely from a man’s activities in the public sphere, measured by accumulated wealth and status, by geographic and social mobility” (Kimmel 1996: 17). Because his identity is inextricably tied to the ebbs and flows of the market, this man is chronically insecure and desperate to assert his masculinity to himself and others (Kimmel 1996: 23).

In the 19th-century, the vast majority of American women were relegated to the domestic sphere, inextricably linking the home with femininity (Kimmel 1996: 44). Like a mother reprimanding her rambunctious son, the role of the wife came to be one of tempering her husband, promoting sobriety, sexual fidelity, and Christian piety (Kimmel 1996: 44). For many men, the home felt emasculating and they needed an escape. Thus, new spaces for competitive masculine performance were required for men to be men. For many, work was (and still is) the primary site for manliness. But as women flooded the labor market in the early 20th-century, pool halls, pubs, street corners, and other leisure activities opened up as places to prove one’s tenuous manliness (Kimmel 1996: 92).

### **The Lodge Room**

Today, American hegemonic masculinity largely resembles the Self-Made Man, but traces of the Heroic Artisan are still present. Ancient Lodge is a felicitous example of these simultaneous masculinities, and many of the tropes described above resemble some of my findings in the field. Mimicking the antiquated guild structure, Masonic lodges create a sense of solidarity among local members of the community who belong to it. And like the craftsmen of old, many lodges are active participants in community affairs, funding local scholarships, donating to food banks, or picking up litter on the side of the road.

Ancient Lodge is a modest, one-and-a-half story building on a quiet side street in Cedarkill, New York. It was completed in 1963, and its white walls, concrete foundation, and gable-end roof appear unassuming. Besides two rectangular support columns, the only adornment is a blue sign above the door identifying this as Ancient Lodge and sporting the famous Square and Compass symbol. The lodge is divided into two floors: the lodge room upstairs and the basement down below.<sup>51</sup> The lodge room—where they conduct their theatrical rituals and professional business meetings—stands in stark opposition to the building’s humble exterior. The teal walls are adorned with numerous artistic renditions of Masonic symbols, such as the letter “G,” the Square and Compass, and globes perched upon Ionic and Corinthian columns. Wooden pews line the walls, and leather-cushioned chairs are positioned on elevated stages situated east, west, and south.<sup>52</sup> An American flag stands with pride of place by the Worshipful Master’s chair, and a print of George Washington in Masonic garb is hung on the opposite wall. In the center of the room, a massive bible rests upon an altar, and it’s illuminated by three candles placed upon four-foot tall, wooden candlesticks.<sup>53</sup> While I won’t go into any more exhaustive detail here, the layout and arrangement of the room is explicitly contrived as a tool to instill Masonic values, as argued by historian William D. Moore in his book *Masonic Temples: Freemasonry, Ritual Architecture, and Masculine Archetypes* (Moore 2006: 16).

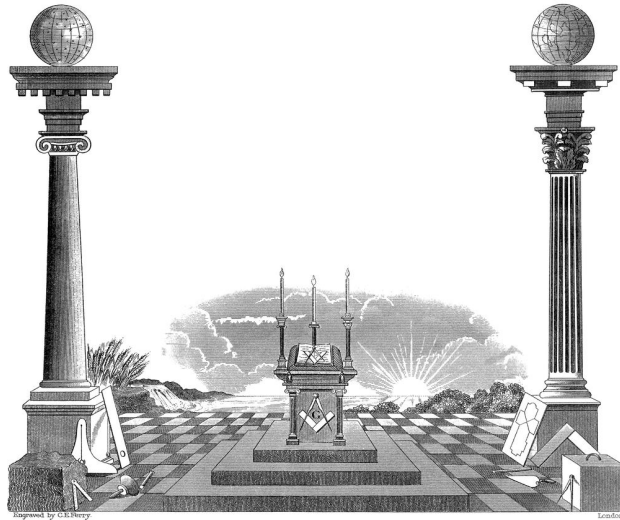
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<sup>51</sup> It is a codified Masonic tradition to construct lodge rooms above ground level. Practically, this retains a degree of privacy, but symbolically, it separates the sacred from the profane (Moore 2006: 16, 26).

<sup>52</sup> During a ritual, these positions are occupied by the Worshipful Master, and the Senior and Junior Wardens, respectively.

<sup>53</sup> These are also situated east, west, and south in the shape of a triangle. This shape and these geographic directions are a common leitmotif in Masonic myth.





*Masonic engraving, Altar between Pillars, depicting: a Square and Compass on an altar supporting the Holy Bible; three candlesticks situated east, west and south; Masonic working tools like the plumb and 24 inch gauge; and two different types of columns supporting globes (Ferry 1927).*

In this space, the values extolled during the rituals closely resemble those of the Heroic Artisan. Masons don ceremonial aprons, assuming the mythic role of the pious craftsmen who built King Solomon’s Temple. In the first degree ritual, a brother representing the soon-to-be Entered Apprentice recites a lecture, which is basically a scripted call-and-response with another Mason.<sup>54</sup> Towards the end of the lecture, the Entered Apprentice describes how the twenty-four hours of the day should be split into three equal parts: “eight hours are for the service of God and distressed worthy Brothers, eight for our usual vocations, and eight for restfulness and sleep” (Masonic Lodge Publication 2013: “Lecture 1”). Earlier, Kimmel mentioned that the Heroic Artisan is stalwart to his comrades, but the Masons take that loyalty even further by treating service to their brethren as equivalent to serving God Almighty.

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<sup>54</sup> After completing the first degree, the candidate-cum-Entered Apprentice must memorize this lecture to be “passed” to the second degree.

The next question asked of the EA is “What came you here to do,” and he responds “Learn to subdue my passions and improve myself in Masonry” (Masonic Lodge Publication 2013: “Lecture 1”). One of Freemasonry’s stated goals is to promote virtuousness among men, or as they say “make good men better,” and they believe that virtue is impossible to achieve if one is subject to impulsive desires and vice. While the language of self-improvement is reminiscent of the Self-Made Man, many Masons understand self-betterment as a service to their brothers and the community, while the Self-Made Man works on behalf of himself first and foremost.

Throughout this initiation ritual, candidates are not only told a story, they (along with the Masons) embody mythic characters, which in turn constitute their identities off stage. But before I deconstruct this theatrical event, I will define my use of the words “body,” and “embodying,” which are crucial to my forthcoming arguments. For Butler, “the body is always an embodying *of* possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention,” and some of the elementary structures of embodiment are “to do, to dramatize, [and] to reproduce” (1988: 521). She acknowledges that there are a near-infinite number of ways that a body can be constructed, understood, and experienced, but like Kiesling, she recognizes that those possibilities are historically constricted or defined. ‘The’ body can only be understood as a gendered body (Butler 1988: 523), so to understand the constitution of the body and of gender more broadly, one must examine the embodying process, which is composed of a series of repetitive acts.

As discussed in the first chapter, when a candidate arrives at the lodge for the ritual, he is first ushered into an anteroom where he is asked to strip down to his underwear, so he can don his ceremonial costume for the upcoming event. In that vulnerable position, he is under the watchful eye of his conductor and sometimes other candidates. Because female bodies are explicitly forbidden

in this space, the candidate's own body and those of his brothers come to signify a masculine body—which is the only possibility this context allows. Gender performativity is composed of a series of repeated acts, and this particular performance is nothing new to the people involved.

This ritual is particularly reminiscent of getting changed in a school locker room before a big game. There, bodies are also on display in a gender-exclusive space, and nudity is a prerequisite for an upcoming performance. 'Male' bodies struggle to conform to an historical idea of 'masculine,' and failure to do so results in obvious and subtle punishments (insults, social exclusion)—at least in the locker room.<sup>55</sup> In that context, people's identities are still unknown, so teasing is used as a form of questioning. But at the lodge, one's masculine identity is assumed because it has been repeated for decades. Merely having a body in these spaces demands a performance, and the repetition of those performances constitutes the contours of that body and contribute to the fiction of a consistent, static identity that is understood as oneself.

To describe the rest of the ritual's performances, I will return to the first person so as not to risk generalizing my personal experience as universal. After putting on my costume, I was blindfolded, and my conductor took me by the arm and led me in circles around the lodge room. Occasionally, I heard a gavel bang and was ordered "left face." By following the movements of my conductor, I turned 90 degrees on my heel—like a marching soldier—to face the inquisitor's voice. I was asked if this was "an act of my own free will and accord," and after answering in the affirmative, I turned on my heel once again and was conducted around the lodge until I heard a gavel bang for the second and third time, where the same question was asked as before. Eventually, I was directed to the center of the lodge and told to kneel before an altar, where a Square and Compass sat upon

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<sup>55</sup> While the Masons tease each other during poker games, it is far more jovial and consensual than the often-vicious locker room banter.

an open bible. After swearing my obligation to the brotherhood, my blindfold was removed, literally and symbolically “bringing me to light.” The Worshipful Master of the lodge told me that “there I stood an upright man and Mason,” and he instructed me to “carry myself as such before God and man.”

In addition to that explicit instruction, the numerous bodily gestures that comprised my performance constituted my identity as a Mason and as man. The role was defined, and I was taught how to perform it (be it incompletely). By corporeally reproducing the archetype of the Heroic Artisan, I embodied it, which in turn constituted my body. Without my conductor, I would have been totally lost: my somatic senses failing to situate myself in space. For Butler, performing the ideal gendered body is a social matter (Butler 1988: 525), and I could not have done it without my conductor and the rest of the brothers’ participation. But by following my conductor’s every move and whispered command, I was eventually “brought to light” and taught the importance of hierarchy and following commands. That hierarchy is just as horizontal as it is vertical, however. I was told that we were all brothers “on the level,” thus encouraging me to see and understand myself as a reflection of the other. What I saw were men, and because I was their brother, I must be one too. The 1723 *Constitutions* implies that only men have the capacity for free will (Anderson 1734: 49), so when I confirmed that this was indeed an act of my own volition, I performed masculinity through a speech-act signifying it. Because my gendered performance was successfully interpreted as masculine and conforming to Masonic values, I was declared to be “an upright man and Mason,” thus further reifying my gendered identity and signifying my future acts as Masonic and those of a man, ever to be reproduced. In some form or another, these identities will stay with me forever.

What I've just described are attempts at attaining an ideal gender, and Butler argues that performance never fully achieves the ideal (Butler 1988: 522, 526). As much as one might try, the repetition always misses the mark. A complete merging of performance and ideal is an impossibility, but this striving is what gender is. This opens up a flexibility, allowing multiple masculinities and gendered selves to exist simultaneously.

For instance, the Masonic symbol of a Common Gavel is used to divest "one's mind and conscience of all of the vices and superfluities of life" (Masonic Lodge Publication 2013: "Lecture 1"). This allows men to strive to be virtuous, just like the Heroic Artisans who constructed King Solomon's Temple, who we mimicked during the ritual. This may seem like a contradiction, however, as temperance and piety are often associated with femininity (Kimmel 1996: 93), and if Masonic lodges are supposed to be spaces for men to be men, then why do their rituals promote the same feminine softening that guys already experience in the home? To answer this question, I posit that masculinity and femininity are not always at odds with each other, and they shouldn't necessarily be treated as dichotomies. There are elements of what might be considered feminine in the idealized Masonic man, and this slippage between categories is the result of repetitive performance and not some kind of intrinsic contradiction.

Freemasonry and the lodge also play multiple, simultaneous roles in Masons' lives. The moral teachings of the ritual are certainly important to the Masons of Ancient Lodge, and they are sincerely encouraged to internalize the values of personal responsibility, piety, virtue, and respectfulness, and bring those character traits into other parts of their lives: as fathers, husbands, businessmen, and community members. When learned in the lodge room, those values are not associated with femininity, but with a noble masculinity that is at once timeless, yet from a bygone

era. But when poker night rolls around and the guys head downstairs to the basement, that humble, pious masculinity just isn't in the cards. There, a "boys will be boys" style of masculinity reigns supreme.

### **The Poker Table**

After descending the stairs from the lodge room, one finds oneself in the lodge basement, which is used for all of the Masons' non-ritualistic events, like fundraisers, dances, and game nights. The rectangular, symmetrical room feels a bit like a church basement built in the '70s. The white tile is brightly illuminated by the fluorescents above, and the walls and support columns are carpeted with royal blue and dark yellow fabrics. On poker nights, the guys spread a green felt tablecloth over a circular folding table and sip expensive scotch out of plastic Dixie cups. The dealer changes every round and picks the game. Wayne, a grouchy old hay farmer, always chooses 'Midnight Baseball,' which is all luck and no skill. But somehow, he always creams us. In awe, but with a twinge of jealousy, Bill often says "Jesus Wayne! What did you step in?" If Wayne's beating me, I like to get my money back by dealing Texas Hold'em, his least favorite game. With a five dollar entrance fee, the stakes are pretty low, but we joke about being high-rollers, ready to pull our six shooters on anyone caught cheating. We also tease each other for forgetting whose turn it is—it's usually Bill's.



*Masonic Print by "Michelson" found in Ancient Lodge basement. It seems to depict the wife of a Mason looking at her husband longingly before he heads out to the lodge for a degree ceremony (as indicated by the apron in his hand). His facial expression indicates a conflict between his duty to the lodge and the comforts and warmth of the home*

The masculinity learned and performed in the basement is notably distinct from the type espoused in the formal business meetings and rituals conducted upstairs in the lodge room. Downstairs, they're free to talk about topics that are *verboten* in the lodge room (politics, religion, personal matters), and many of their conversations can be described, as Bill put it, "talking shit."<sup>56</sup> Echoing the title of Kiesling's ethnography, one of the regular poker players told me that he appreciates our bi-weekly card games because he "doesn't have to watch what [he] says." But while he finds liberation in openly expressing his masculinity, his behavior is still constrained by a hegemonic masculinity that punishes (be it gently) speech and gestures considered feminine.

On the second or third time I played poker at the lodge, I wore black nail polish. Coming from a school where fluid gender expression is widely accepted, I had forgotten that nail polish was

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<sup>56</sup> Bill also told me that "you can't swear like a sailor in the lodge room," because it would be disrespectful.

considered by many to be a feminine signifier, and I was initially taken aback when Wayne asked “what the hell is on your nails.” All night, the guys had been laughing as they ribbed each other for being old, bald, or “pussy-whipped,” so perhaps Wayne poked fun at me because he felt like I was enough of a peer to receive a playful jab, but I also believe t this speech-act was a corrective measure for violating norms. Eager to fit in and preemptively deflect further jabs,<sup>57</sup> I mentioned something about it being my girlfriend’s doing. Astonished, Bill said “you let her do *that*?!” I figured that being “whipped” probably had more credibility at the table than being a “fruitcake,”<sup>58</sup> so I said, “She’s my stylist. And trust me, guys, you don’t want to second-guess this woman,” which got a few chuckles and an “I’ll drink to that.”

Gerald took a long sip from his scotch and turned to Bill, “So what you’re saying, Billy, is that if a pretty little thing wanted to paint your nails, have a little *fun*, you’d say no?”

Bill scoffed, “Hell no! She’s not getting anywhere near me with that stuff.”

Smirking, Gerald sat back in his chair and said, “then tell me, Billy, when was the last time *you* got laid?” After a round of laughter, Wayne snapped at Bill to deal the damn cards already, so he can take his money.

In Kiesling’s ethnography, he deconstructs a remarkably similar interaction between fraternity brothers playing a game of Monopoly, so I will use a similar approach to analyze the subtext of this conversation.<sup>59</sup> For the anthropologist, identity performance takes place in “stances,” which he defines as “the location of the structural coupling between performativity and structure” (Kiesling 2001: 252). He continues, claiming that “‘Masculinity’ is thus a bundle of stances, which

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<sup>57</sup> As a former adolescent with the last name “Hard,” I knew they had a lot to work with.

<sup>58</sup> That evening, I wrote in my field notes: “I consciously performed masculinity.”

<sup>59</sup> Kiesling recorded the conversation he wrote about and was able to accurately include minute details like silences and pronunciations. But the conversation I have presented here is a reconstruction based on memory and field notes scribbled surreptitiously onto scrap paper or in my smartphone.



have in common a claim to authority that puts a person at the top of some hierarchy...whether it be the structure of an institution, the structure of society, the nature of someone's knowledge, or the nature of someone's experience." Throughout the Masons' social interactions, they take a variety of stances contoured by their shared identities (white men, middle-class men, American men, Freemasons) to come out on top as they navigate multiple hierarchies, such as game skill, personal appearance, and sexual aptitude/experience.

As I touched upon earlier, Wayne's initial comment was at once a gesture of camaraderie with the implicit invitation to "bust his balls," and thus take a similar stance—but it was also a performative way to signify his and the other guys' masculinities by drawing attention to my feminine signifier, which by contrast, signifies their unpainted nails as masculine. This othering put me in a subordinated position, wherein my heterosexuality—among other facets of my masculinity—could be called into question, thereby reinforcing the hegemonic masculinity practiced by the other guys. To establish that I was neither queer nor that far from the masculine norm,<sup>60</sup> I self-effacingly explained that my girlfriend coerced me into it. I had previously encountered the cultural trope of the wife as the arbiter of her husband's clothing and stylistic presentation,<sup>61</sup> so I figured that common experience might redeem my suspicious masculinity. Although these guys are in the dominant position within most spheres of their lives, many of them describe their wives as the ultimate authority of the home, a common locus of their subordination. They make self-deprecating

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<sup>60</sup> Typically, I'm not concerned with challenges to my masculinity, particularly with regards to my sexuality. But to fit in (and for the sake of access), I gave a gendered performance that I presumed would be interpreted as masculine. It was also kind of fun to perform a role that I don't feel really comfortable in, and which I usually try to consciously eschew for (feminist) political reasons.

<sup>61</sup> In 2016, a spate of magazine articles were written about wives and girlfriends refusing to let their male lovers out of the house while wearing the hideous garment known as "cargo shorts."

jokes about it, like “getting away from the ol’ ball and chain,” but it’s clear that they need an escape from it sometimes.

When Gerald entered the conversation, the eye of scrutiny shifted from my masculinity to Bill’s. Immediately, Gerald linguistically positioned himself over Bill by referring to his name in the diminutive form, which isn’t unusual, but perhaps the otherwise playful name has a deeper significance within this context. Then in his first question to Bill, “if a pretty little thing wanted paint your nails, have a little *fun*, you’d say no?” his voice went up an octave on “fun” as a little flourish. Here, he implies that having one’s nails painted by a lover is adventurous, and that if sex was a possibility, refusing a manicure could sour the mood. Because nail polish is a feminine signifier and he was at the poker table with other guys, Bill tried to maintain his dominant status as a manly man by proudly refusing to wear it, even in the relative privacy of the home. But by questioning how often Bill has sex, Gerald inverted a subordinated position in one hierarchy—masculine presentation, or lack thereof—into a dominant position in another: sexual prowess.

Kimmel would describe this competitive, masculine banter as characteristic of a culture of the Self-Made Man. Because the Self-Made man can lose his masculinity far quicker than he can establish it, he must constantly prove himself lest anyone gets the wrong idea. Obviously there are important cultural, social, and economic differences between now and 100 years ago, but similar economic conditions that encouraged self-made masculinity in the early 20th-century (industrialization, immigration, women joining the workplace) are still present and induce anxiety for many American men (Kimmel 1996: 238).<sup>62</sup> But for some American men, and a few of my fellow Masons, work is still a place where they can assert their manhood to other men, be in it a limited

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<sup>62</sup> As manufacturing jobs ship overseas and many American families teeter on the brink of poverty, deindustrialization has done what industrialization did over 100 years ago: wreaked havoc on previously established forms of masculinity and forced men to redefine the terms of manliness and how to perform it (Broughton, Waldon 2006).

sense. Many of them are salesmen, and while sales isn't a physical form of labor, it is still competitive and lends itself to masculine jockeying. But with the influx of women into the workplace, and a growing cultural hostility towards unbridled manliness in public and professional spaces, much of that competition takes place in recreational spaces (Kimmel 1996: 192).

While physical space divides various masculinities at the lodge, that distinction isn't always clear. Bill told me a story about a poker game some of the Masons were having in the basement of the lodge while some of the ladies of The Order of the Eastern Star<sup>63</sup> were conducting a meeting upstairs. One of the guys told a filthy joke and screamed the punchline, and the other guys were livid and made him apologize to the women for being so crass. Normally, dirty jokes are expected and encouraged during poker games, but because women were unwitting audience members to the bit, it was considered totally inappropriate. Like Kimmel's description of the Heroic Artisan, these Masons are also quite formal in their relationships with women. Bill, who swears like a sailor, told me that his friend's behavior that evening was "disrespectful and totally ungentlemanlike." Usually, the masculine poker table and the feminine home are undeniably and purposely separate, so when those spheres overlapped, acceptable forms of behavior were no longer clearly defined. While space usually determines acceptable behavior, the context of how spaces are used must be taken into account as well.

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<sup>63</sup> The Order of the Eastern Star is a "concordant body" of Freemasonry that is primarily for the wives of Masons. Men can join as well, but many consider it a women's organization. Despite this, meetings must be "opened" by a Master Mason. David, one of the guys at Ancient Lodge, is also a member of The Eastern Star chapter, and the guys tease him with the honorific "sister David." To join, a man must be a third degree Mason, and in seeming contradiction with Blue Lodge membership, women must have some kind of direct relationship with a Mason (wife, daughter, mother). At Ancient Lodge, however, this requirement has loosened to include cousins and step-siblings.

## Community Dinners and The Grill

The lodge basement is often a site of hardcore masculine performance during poker games, but the space becomes more ambiguous when they hold other social events like community dinners. While community dinners aren't seen as community service *per se*, they are intended as fundraisers for the lodge's various charitable endeavors. They are generally considered social events, but they're distinct from other lodge activities because they're open to the public. Most of the attendees are working class families, the majority of which do not seem to be directly affiliated with the lodge. But a handful of the Masons' friends and family members stop by to eat or help out. Brian's wife Jessica, for instance, always helps him dish out ice cream at the dessert station.

Because there are a lot of children and little old ladies dining on corned beef or barbeque chicken, the brothers' tongues are not as loose as when it is just the guys. Many of the Masons still horse around—whipping each others' butts with dish towels—but they go to great lengths to be gracious hosts: doting on grandmothers, plating food for disabled people, and asking children how they're doing in school.

During the dinners, the Masons make their space public by using terminology of the public sphere—referring to diners as “customers” or “guests”—and performing the role of the restaurateur. Some are waiters and busboys; others work in the kitchen washing plates, packaging to-go orders, and cooking side-dishes; Brian fiercely defends his post at the dessert station; and some of the more senior, burly Masons run the grill outside. While every position is essential for the whole affair, the grill guys like to think of themselves as the stars of the show. The meat is the main event, and Wayne, the “grillmeister,” takes great care to ensure an adequate balance of char and succulence. He wants to make sure that his guests leave happy, but his tender stoking of the coals

and expertly timed flips are more than just good customer service: They're a way to assert and perform his masculinity.

In Anne DeLessio-Parson's ethnography *Vegetarianism in a Meat Landscape*, the anthropologist explores the interplay between diet and gender in the carnivorous culture of Argentina. Citing the feminist writer Carol J. Adams, DeLessio-Parson posits that "Men and meat are seen as strong and of central importance, whereas vegetables are food of the weak. Eating meat is thus a central part of masculinity" (Delessio-Parson 2013: 21). Here, meat is connected to masculinity as both are associated with power and strength.

In the United States as well, meat is inextricably linked with manliness. In Carol J. Adams' 1990 book *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, the feminist author takes a random survey of cookbooks, and she finds that barbeque sections that prominently feature meat are almost always addressed to men. She also argues that "[American] men who decide to eschew meat eating are deemed effeminate," and that "one's maleness is reassured by the food one eats" (Adams 1990: 34). There are countless advertising campaigns that capitalize on the association between meat and masculinity, thus further reifying it. Take for example Burger King's "I Am a Man" commercial, where a hungry man sings about rejecting "chick food," like quiche and tofu, in favor of a cheeseburger consisting solely of meat and cheese (the omission of vegetables is another selling point). As he marches through a nondescript urban street, declaring his devotion to carnivorous cuisine, he is joined by a veritable rainbow coalition of men from multiple ethnicities and professions who join the white middle-class protagonist to celebrate their allegiance to meat. Despite differences in race and class, these men are depicted as a unified whole, connected by their love of meat and the subsequent rejection of femininity. While advertising contains the most glaring examples of the meat-manhood connection,

it is also a lived experience that is constantly performed and reproduced at Super Bowl parties, bars, backyard grills, and numerous other sites across the country.

Despite the abjectly masculine culture of professional kitchens (Julier and Lindenfeld 2005), domestic kitchens are widely considered to be feminine spaces. When women are relegated to the domestic sphere, one of their duties is to provide sustenance for their husbands and children. But this gendered segregation of space can interfere with other elements of hegemonic American masculinity, specifically the archetype of the breadwinner and provider.<sup>64</sup> To bring home the proverbial bacon—and literally eat it too—American men have come to establish the grill as a space to strive for a patriarchal ideal (providing sustenance) while preemptively deflecting any allegations of femininity associated with food production.

Physically, the grill is separated from the home and literally outside. This spatial orientation means that grill operators must contend with the elements in addition to the blistering heat of the grill itself. It also creates a social space for men to hang out with each other at backyard barbeques across suburbia. Away from their wives, who are stereotypically preoccupied in the domestic sphere of the kitchen, men are free to speak ‘man to man.’ Besides scale, the massive grill at the lodge (also referred to as “the pit”) is quite similar, but it’s a space where the opposition between masculinity and femininity can be articulated outside of the home. In the lodge’s kitchen, the Masons delicately chop vegetables and ensure that the food is presented in an aesthetically pleasing way. And in the dining area, the waiters ensure that customers are happy and satisfied. These potentially feminine concerns are absent from the pit, where the guys slap massive slabs of beef onto the cooking grates and demonstrate their strength by hauling heavy logs off the pile and nonchalantly tossing them

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<sup>64</sup> In the anteroom before my third degree ritual, three of the other initiates talked about the tragedy of not seeing their families very often, because they are working long hours to “provide for them.”

onto the coals. Plus, the grill operators don't have to present a public face to the diners, nor do they have to worry about alienating or offending any of the non-Masons or non-men inside. In this discrete space, they are free to dive deep into the pros and cons of various tractor parts, complain about their wives, predict the outcome of upcoming sporting events, and negotiate the ideal time to flip the meat.

### ***Chapter III: Brotherhood and the Imagined Community of Fellows***

To better understand the scale and significance of being ‘on the level,’ I suggest that Freemasonry should be understood as an imagined global community. Although Freemasonry is not a political entity, and thus not a nation, I will use Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* to frame it as an imagined community. For Anderson, a community is “imagined” because most of its members will never come in contact with one another (Anderson 1991: 6). He concedes that all communities are imagined to some degree, but the *style* in which they’re imagined is dependent on numerous cultural and political forms (Anderson 1991: 6).

One of the ways the Masonic imagined community is constituted is through their conception of history and time. Citing Walter Benjamin, Anderson claims that pre-capitalist religious conceptions of time can be understood as “messianic,” wherein the past and the future are collapsed into an instantaneous present (Anderson: 1991: 24). This is distinct from the nation, where historical events are understood as happening simultaneously, and time is evenly divided into neutral units (months, days, hours, minutes etc.). Anderson borrows the term “empty, homogeneous time” from Benjamin to describe this time, which is measured by calendars and clocks instead of more physical, embodied realities like seasons and the positions of the sun in the sky (Anderson 1991: 24). Most of the Masons at Ancient Lodge share a historical sensibility, but depending on the context, Freemasonry can be experienced like a nation or a religion with regards to history and time.

The importance of “history” is invoked in nearly every space within the lodge, but what that history consists of is contextually determined. According to historian William D. Moore and a few of my friends at the lodge, many of the more religious or ritual-minded Masons imagine themselves



as unmoored from their own chronology as they enter ancient Israel, and all eras in between, when they perform the degree rituals. Just as the lodge room symbolizes the mythical King Solomon's Temple, it also represents every space used by Freemasons throughout history, and it is in that ethereal realm that they are united with all brothers past, present, and future (Moore 2006: 18). This messianic time stands in stark contrast with their sense of sequential and simultaneous time experienced during business meetings. The Masons navigate "empty, homogeneous time" by scheduling their meetings every other week at a specific time, which prevents other calendrical conflicts in Masons' lives, such as meetings at other nearby lodges.

### **Freemasonry and "History"**

For many of the Masons at Ancient Lodge, the brotherhood is a way to "get in touch with history." One of those histories is that of Freemasonry itself, but there is vast disagreement as to when Freemasonry actually started. Some Masons, like Jonathan, locate Freemasonry's emergence in the biblical era. The Masonic ritual texts refer to God as the "Grand Architect," who passed down Masonic ideals and tools to Adam, who imparted that wisdom upon other biblical children, such as Noah who used "*Geometry*" to build his fabled arc (Anderson 1734: 9). How literally one takes the religious elements of Masonry varies lodge to lodge and person to person, but because all Freemasons believe in a "Supreme Being," a messianic understanding of Masonic history is quite common. But for Masons like Robert, the brotherhood began when a few stonemason guilds consolidated, admitted non-craftsmen among their rank, and lodge practices were abstracted from physical labor—and this narrative is consistent with many scholars on the subject (Bullock 1996; Jacob 2006). Robert is particularly fond of how Masonry was a way for titled aristocracy and members of the emerging merchant class to intermingle without conflict and "see eye to eye."

At Ancient Lodge, Freemasonry has also helped many brothers feel personally connected to the history of the United States as well as their kin. In my third degree ritual, for instance, Gerald played the role of the fisherman, which was his father's part in the ensemble when he was still alive. After the ritual, Gerald told the brothers that performing that role made him feel closer to his departed father and Masonic mentor. Bill initially became a Freemason to learn more about his grandfather, who had been a member of Ancient Lodge. Besides his father, Bill comes from a long line of American Masons. Of the many reasons why he's frustrated with his dad—who abandoned the family when Bill was a child—is that his father broke the chain of Masonic lineage. His grandfather died when Bill was quite young, but by joining the lodge, he learned about a different side of him, one his grandmother never knew. He befriended his grandfather's friends and practiced the same rituals as he had, which Bill feels brought him closer to his grandfather's life. Bill is also a Civil War reenactor, and he prides himself on the authenticity of his original musket and gear. During a reenactment, he camps out over night, eats hardtack, and marches at dawn to the beat of drum and a melodic flute. This embodied performance of history makes him feel directly connected with his ancestors who fought for the Union. While Bill has never served in the military, he is deeply appreciative of those who have, particularly his family members. A historical reenactment is messianic, in a sense, because the distance between the past and the present is collapsed as reenactors fully embrace the lives of a bygone time: divesting themselves of any materials produced after 1865, speaking in an antiquated parlance, and moving to the rhythm of life dictated by historical conditions.

Freemasonry and American history can be hard to distinguish at times. Many of the founding framers were themselves Masons, and many of the philosophical principles of early

American independence (liberty, equality, fraternity) overlap with Masonic ideals and teachings. The Civil War is perhaps the most popular historical topic at Ancient Lodge, but the colonial and revolutionary era are a close second. For Masons like Bill and Gerald, many of the ideals espoused by the ‘founding fathers’ are worth celebrating and continuing today, but they also think that it’s intrinsically valuable to know how the United States was created. They firmly identify themselves as Americans, so it follows that they would believe in—and reproduce—the creation myth of America.

Much of their Masonic identity is intertwined with their American identity, so when Bill and Gerald recount historical events, it’s not unusual for Masonry to play a role. In many of these historical narratives, there is often a conflict between men’s allegiance to Masonry and their country. When war broke out in 1776, for instance, Masons fought on both sides of the conflict, so the question of loyalty to the crown or the revolution divided American Masons and their lodges throughout the period (Bullock 1996: 114). But as the war progressed, scores of Continental soldiers and officers learned The Craft, and many Masons loyal to the crown fled to England (Bullock 1996: 114). Even though politics is supposed to be banned from the lodge, the polarizing effect of war was impossible to ignore. According to one of the guys at the lodge, Masons fighting each other is a tremendous tragedy, but he claimed that the war put an end to other internal divisions within Masonry, and the brotherhood was stronger after the revolution than before.

Even so, conflicting national allegiances divided brothers and pitted them against each other, and the transnational, universal brotherhood failed to mend this schism. But according to Gerald, this hasn’t always been the case. Before a poker game, I asked him to tell me a bit about the Masons’ sense of brotherhood and what that means to him, and he used an example from the Civil War. He claimed that doctors would often operate on soldiers from the opposing side if they were both

Masons. Bill chimed in, and claimed that POW guards would give extra food to their imprisoned brothers. This is remarkable, because during the war, the United States was literally tearing asunder down the middle. The cohesion and unity of the nation was severely jeopardized, as each side saw the other as anti-American. Common historical narratives often claim that the war pitted “brother against brother.” While there were a few documented cases of biological siblings fighting each other, the statement is far more significant when one recognizes that nations are experienced as brotherhoods (Anderson 1991: 7). This is a powerful myth for American Masons, because it confirms the ideal of a universal brotherhood that transcends all other boundaries, even when the nation is in crisis.

In addition to these two self-described history buffs, most of the Masons at Ancient Lodge frame historical narratives around individuals. This is extremely common in the U.S., but it’s also consistent with Masonic philosophy, which espouses free will and people’s capacity to powerfully change the world, for better or for worse. At Ancient Lodge, President George Washington is probably their favorite historical figure, and for good reason. On September 18, 1793, President Washington, wearing his Masonic apron, dedicated the U.S. Capitol by placing a silver plate upon the corner stone and covering it with the Masonic symbols of corn, oil, and wine (Bullock 1996: 137). This ceremony identified Freemasonry with the new republic, and according to Bullock, a cult of ‘Washington-as-Mason’ has pervaded American Masonry since (Bullock 1996: 137).

Nearly every Mason I’ve spoken with has mentioned George Washington at some point. In the sacred space of the lodge room, a framed painting of Washington wearing a Masonic apron has pride of place. Before my first and second degree ritual, both of my conductors told me not to worry because “we’ve all been through this, even George Washington.” Here, the camaraderie felt

between the brothers of Ancient Lodge messianically extends through time and space to incorporate the first president. According to Bill, Masonic practices have withstood the tests of time and haven't changed since Washington's era, which I had already heard multiple times from other Masons. Even though the specific language of the ritual has been contested and negotiated since it began,<sup>65</sup> the messianic experience it invokes conceals these historical variations. Many Masons recognize that different lodges have their own interpretations of the ritual, and that the ritual in their own lodge has changed over time. But those same men firmly believe that at its essence, it is the same as it ever was.



*A similar print of Washington in Masonic garb hangs in Ancient's lodge room. Unknown artist and date.*

The oldest operating lodge in America is St. John's No.1 in New York City, founded in 1757, and when taking his oath of office, George Washington swore on a bible that is currently housed there. Today, that bible is under close lock and key. Bill said that a few years ago, the Grand

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<sup>65</sup> This often happens during the ritual itself. Bill told me that the current lecturer likes to "modernize" the language, much to the chagrin of some of the older Masons. In my first and second degree ritual, the Masons often engaged in little back-and-forths about "correct" diction.

Lodge of New York brought that bible around to various lodges in the state so they could “witness a piece of their history.” It was accompanied by an armed guard, and when it arrived at Ancient Lodge, the only Mason allowed to touch it was a veteran Marine who had just served a tour of duty in Iraq. Throughout the story, Bill stressed the significance of Washington physically laying his hands upon it and the connection one has to him when they do the same.<sup>66</sup> But that connection is privileged, and it’s significant that the only Mason who has earned that connection is a veteran: one who has demonstrated his devotion to the nation that Washington founded. This is also consistent with the lodge’s pervasive reverence for veterans and the military, as discussed later in the Table Lodge section.

When I asked Ricardo, the former Worshipful Master of the lodge, to tell me about the history of Freemasonry, he proudly listed some of the ‘founding fathers’ who signed the constitution as among the Masonic ranks. He said that George Washington was chosen to lead the Continental army not because of his military acumen, but because he was a Mason—an honest man dedicated to liberty, fraternity, and equality. After winning the war against Britain and becoming the nation’s first president, Washington was allegedly encouraged to found a national Masonic lodge. But according to Ricardo, Washington rejected this idea because he feared that the Freemasons may become more powerful than the government. This narrative is a Masonic version of the common American myth “Washington rejects becoming the king of America” (Haggard 2002). If Masonry was indeed a credible threat to the state, Washington’s decision implies that the American government’s sovereignty and security were more important than his personal allegiances. Thus, Washington is portrayed as noble for protecting the ideals that he and every other patriot fought for.

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<sup>66</sup> He told me that President Barack Obama swore on this bible during his 2009 inauguration, which nearly ruined the object’s significance for Bill, not for any political reasons, but because Obama is not a Mason (contrary to a few outlandish conspiracy theories).

## George Washington Masonic National Memorial

While the United States has never had a national Grand Lodge, there is the George Washington Masonic National Memorial. The memorial is often referenced in Masonic brochures and other literature, but only a few Masons at Ancient Lodge have actually visited it. Bill said, “It’s certainly a site to behold,” but when I asked some of the other guys if they’d been, most cited pragmatic reasons why not—it’s a six-hour drive from the lodge, and a trip would require an overnight stay. If possible, however, many of the Masons would go in a heartbeat. While the memorial is not a major part of Ancient Lodge, it is still extremely relevant to the national level of the imagined community of Freemasons.

Construction of the memorial began in 1922 in Alexandria, Virginia and it was dedicated ten years later. In 1910, the Grand Lodge of Virginia called upon every American Grand Lodge to come to Alexandria to organize a memorial temple to the first president. President William H. Taft, himself a Mason, spoke at the meeting: “No honor can be greater than to have a direct association with that great man, who, in every sense, was the founder of this Republic and who exhibited, as President, as man, and as Mason, all the principles of morality, of patriotism and of religion that we like to think is our highest ideal” (Mount Vernon). The dates associated with the memorial’s construction and dedication are also of deep national significance. The meeting of the various lodges in Virginia occurred on February 22, 1910 (Washington’s birthday), and the dedication was planned for the same date in 1932, the 200th anniversary of Washington’s birth (Washington Post 1931). However, the memorial was not completed in time, so the date was pushed back to May 13, the 325th anniversary of the English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia (Brown 1980, 56-57).<sup>67</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> However, because 13 is considered an unlucky number, the date was once again changed, this time to May 12.

laying of the memorial's cornerstone was planned for November 4, 1923, the 170th anniversary of Washington's initiation into Freemasonry, however the fourth landed on a Sunday that year, so the cornerstone was laid on the first of the month instead (Dafoe 2010). Through all of this exhausting rigmarole, each of these dates symbolize the creation of the American nation.



*Front view of George Washington Masonic National Memorial.  
Unknown photographer and date.*

During the 1923 cornerstone laying ceremony, over 14,000 Masons, dignitaries, police, and soldiers marched in a parade as Army Air Corps planes flew overhead (Washington Post 1923). While Washington was a general and president, the military-style parade is significant because this memorial was dedicated to Washington as a Mason, not just a military and political leader. Thus, it seems that his role as a Mason and his role as a national figure have collapsed into each other.

Each state deposited an item into the cornerstone, such as an American flag, a lambskin apron, a Christian Bible, a portrait of Washington in Masonic regalia, and copies of the U.S. Constitution (Washington Post 1923). By itself, a symbol like the American flag is typically divorced from anything to do with Masonry, but its juxtaposition to a Masonic apron memorializes the interconnection of Masonry with America. Additionally, because every state contributed an



American or Masonic symbol to the cornerstone during this ceremony, otherwise discrete lodges were symbolically united as American.

The memorial is an enormous affair. The construction of the nine-story, neoclassical structure spanned decades and was finally considered complete in 1972. It had cost millions of dollars, which were raised by local lodges all across the country. Lodges also donated statues, reliefs, paintings, and stonework. Today, it's the only Masonic building supported by all 52 Grand Lodges of the United States, and this collective endeavor further unified disparate lodges under the banner of national unity. Even members of the federal government contributed to the memorial; then President Harry S. Truman, the former Master Mason of the Missouri Grand Lodge, donated an official seal of the United States. Like the military's role in the cornerstone laying ceremony, this gesture symbolically aligns the American government, and the nation as a whole, with Freemasonry.

### **Table Lodge**

Every year, Ancient Lodge holds a celebratory feast known as a "Table Lodge," and the one I attended was intertwined with American national identity and the military. It was held on a Wednesday night down in the basement, as opposed to the lodge room, where roughly 20 Masons sat around three folding tables arranged in the shape of a horseshoe. Even though none of the guys knew when the Table Lodge practice actually started, Gerald, the Worshipful Master, explained in his opening remarks that "Table Lodges were used to bolster the morale of Continental Army soldiers" by promoting fellowship in an uncertain time of scarcity. This is consistent with much of the Masons' sense of cultural history, wherein they imagine and experience a direct connection with the 'founding fathers' and those who fought for the revolution by practicing the same rituals as their forefathers.

After his preamble, the brothers stood, saluted the American flag hung on the wall, and recited the Pledge of Allegiance.<sup>68</sup> Most held their hands over their hearts, but a handful of veterans saluted in the U.S. military style. Nobody knelt. The Pledge is often recited in public schools and at the start of government meetings, which thus signified the lodge's connection to the United States and its government, as a national ceremony was folded into a Masonic one.

The connection to the military and the nation didn't stop there. We were informed that the utensils and glassware before us had new names. Butter knives were swords, shot glasses were arms, and napkins were flags. To fill a glass was to "charge it," and to drink it was to "fire." To begin one of the seven toasts, the Worshipful Master ordered the two conductors to "charge the arms." After everyone's glass was filled with wine or juice, he told us to stand and ordered "right hand to the sword," so we picked up our butter knives. He then ordered "carry the sword," which is to hold the knife parallel to the ground, followed by "salute with the sword," so we held our knives perpendicular to the table. After we were ordered to move the sword to our left hands, we were told "right hand to arms," so we placed our hands on our shots of wine. To "ready arms," we brought our shot glasses to our chins, "aimed" by bringing it to our lips, and "fired" by taking a sip. After the first "fire," we took two more sips, as directed by "good fire" and "sharpest of fire," respectively. In unison, we then brought our glasses to our hearts, moved them to our right breasts, then out in front of us, thus making a triangle with our three distinct motions. We did that thrice and shouted "Vivat!"<sup>69</sup> after each one. But immediately after the third "Vivat!" we smashed our glasses down onto the table simultaneously. We never got the timing down, so instead of a single clash, it was a

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<sup>68</sup> They also recite the Pledge at the start of every business meeting.

<sup>69</sup> A Latin word in the third-person subjunctive, meaning "may he live." In Romance languages, the root *viv-* is often used in a nationalistic context. For instance, "*Vive la France*," directly translating to "long live France" or "hurray for France," is used by politicians to end their speeches, by patriotic citizens on Bastille Day, or during times of national crisis. The *viv-* root can also be used for people. In Fascist Italy, "*Viva il Duce*" was the rough equivalent of "*Heil Hitler*."

cacophony of thuds, which the guys laughed about and ribbed each other for. Because “threes” are a leitmotif of the Table Lodge (and Masonic lore), the seven salutes are perhaps suggestive of the military’s 21 gun salute, which is normally reserved for heads of state.

As previously mentioned, the content of a Table Lodge varies by jurisdiction. Ancient Lodge toasted to the United States, Freemasonry as a whole, Masons who have died, the Grand Master of the State of New York, God, the Holy Saints John, and the U.S. armed services and its veterans. But not all Table Lodges salute the same people. A Table Lodge text from Minnesota, for instance, does not include a salute to the military or veterans, nor does it instruct the lodge to recite the pledge of allegiance (Table Lodge Program 2001). The text does affirm, however, that the Table Lodge is inextricably linked to the military. “This ceremony is in keeping with the ancient customs handed down to us from military lodges of yore” (Table Lodge Program 2001: 1).

Returning to Ancient Lodge, their toasts, when taken as a whole, show the Masons’ reverence for the various hierarchies in their lives: within Freemasonry, their nation and their religion. The juxtaposition of the military with the other toasts implies that it is just as essential to the lives of Masons as God and the founders of the fraternity (the Holy Saints John), presumably because the nation’s existence is predicated on the military. Toasting to that, and to one’s country as well, signifies the brothers’ allegiance to the nation, but it is also a new pledge of loyalty to the U.S. Thus to be a good Freemason at Ancient Lodge, one must be ever-loyal to the United States.

This is consistent with a statement from the 1723 *Constitutions*: “A Mason is a peaceable Subject to the Civil Powers, wherever he resides or works, and is never to be concern’d in Plots and Conspiracies against the Peace and Welfare of the Nation” (Anderson 1734: 48). While it’s clear that the *Constitutions* wants Masons to be civil and law-abiding, it does not demand abject allegiance to the

state. “If a Brother should be a Rebel against the State,” he cannot be expelled for that alone, even though the lodge “ought to disown his Rebellion, and give no Umbrage or Ground of political Jealousy to the Government” (Anderson 1734: 49). In this passage, the *Constitutions* appears to be more concerned with Masonic lodges becoming political groups than with the beliefs of any one member. But in the event performed by Ancient Lodge, there was not an explicitly expressed choice to ‘opt-out’ of patriotic gestures.

The form and content of this ritual is reminiscent of a military march or formal operation, and intentionally so. The brothers receive orders from a commanding officer, and their precise corporeal gestures—performed in unison—echo those of soldiers. This collective performance is intended to bring the Masons closer together and promote fellowship by having the participants act as a unit. The U.S. military also has a similar goal of bringing otherwise disparate men together to act and experience themselves as a unit, but with the expressed goal of efficient killing capacity and personal survival, not for fellowship in and of itself. A parallel between Masonry and the military is specifically invoked: While the military serves the national community, Masons see themselves as serving the Masonic community. Being a soldier is also a common fantasy for many American men. Films like *American Sniper* and *Black Hawk Down* (both favorites at the lodge), are wildly popular among American men and have generated billions of dollars. These pieces of media allow the viewers to vicariously experience the heroic, exhilarating lives of soldiers and inhabit their absurdly competent bodies. But this goes far beyond media. As previously discussed, Bill is a Civil War reenactor. He has claimed to feel the terror and thrill of running into battle, even though they were firing blanks. It’s true that the U.S. military has recently admitted women to serve in frontline

combat roles, but the military is still an overwhelmingly masculine institution. Thus to many civilian men, the various gestures and stances performed by members of the military are not alien.

## *Conclusion*

Over the course of four months, I visited Bill at his home nearly every week. Ostensibly, he was teaching me the ritual lectures so that my proficiency would be suitable for the upcoming degree ceremonies. But really, Bill and I were hanging out. Drinking whiskey and taking turns petting his cocker spaniel, we shared our specialized knowledge, discussed things like the tension between privacy and security, expressed our fears, and told wild tales of travel and adventure—for hours on end. His wife has dementia and a host of other health problems, and Bill is her primary caregiver: a constant source of stress, anguish, and poignant tragedy in his life. While I believe that our meetings were brief respites for him, they were not one-sided. He is a world-class raconteur and always made me feel welcomed and appreciated. When I drove home from his house, I texted him when I arrived safely, and he checked up on me when I had the flu. In short, we became friends through the process of doing this ethnography.

Despite my various critiques of exclusionary equality and conservative nationalism, I made sincere, honest friendships by becoming a Mason, and I'm proud to be one. The mission to unify men of differing backgrounds, political beliefs, and religions is not always achieved, but I think that my experience is a success story. If I met some of these guys outside of the context of Masonry, I may have dismissed them as cranky old conservatives, thus maintaining my idealized concept of a friend: a fellow young leftist with a creative or intellectual bent (and perhaps a penchant for irony). While I still enjoy those traits, I've become open to intimate friendships with more kinds of people. This is fundamental to the ethnographic method, which forces us as anthropologists to seek out uncomfortable situations that destabilize our 'common sense' understandings of 'different people.' Also, I think befriending older people is just part of growing up. After graduation, I am arranging to

drive around the United States without a set destination, and I plan to visit Masonic lodges in the various communities I end up staying in. Hopefully I'll make some new friends.

Contemporary anthropologists are often hesitant to make broad ethical claims—and for good reason. So while I qualify the forthcoming statement with “of course not *always*,” I still stand by it: Friendship is a positive good, and it's noble to promote and encourage it. In addition to the sheer pleasure of it, there is also political significance to friendship (non-kin based relationships), as new and sustained friendships can break down cultural boundaries and allow for disagreements that don't lead to war.

The goal of my structural critiques—particularly the concept of exclusion based on race, class, and gender—is not intended to be a personal, moral judgement. That would be antithetical to the ethical underpinnings of my arguments.<sup>70</sup> Instead, I am striving to unpack the implications embedded in everyday behavior and social structures.<sup>71</sup> While I did that because I think it's intrinsically valuable to understand how cultures and social groups function and interact with themselves, perhaps newer generations of Masons can use this ethnography to achieve more inclusive Masonic communities.

But when it comes to advocating for women's admittance to mainstream Masonic lodges, I'm on the fence. Generally, I'm perturbed by any all-male organization, and I firmly believe that we should work to build a society where gender is neither seen as essential nor be a deciding factor in how people are treated. Being a man is also not a part of my identity that I put of lot of stock into.

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<sup>70</sup> It is neither politically valuable nor intellectually interesting to use the platform of this ethnography to lambast conservatives for believing in, and reproducing, the beliefs and structures that they have experienced as true throughout their lives. Also, it's unfair to selectively hold individuals personally accountable for the social, political, and economic conditions that shape and define their lives.

<sup>71</sup> I've found that one of the most personal fulfilling applications of anthropology is to help understand one's everyday life, especially elements that are otherwise unexamined and seemingly banal or neural.

But at the same time, that is not the world these guys live in. Essentialized gendered bodies are part of their lived realities, and I think that will need to change, or at least loosen, before women could amicably take the solemn obligation or join the guys for a hand of Five Card, Deuces Wild. Also, I've only been a Mason for about six months, so what I get out of the organization and what it means to me is quite different than for veteran Masons. As such, I don't think that I'm qualified to make sweeping, prescriptive arguments that would fundamentally change how Masonry happens and what it means to people.<sup>72</sup>

### **Where to Go from Here**

Over the course of conducting this ethnography, I have identified numerous omissions and vacancies, some of which are due to the constraints of Bard's Senior Project format and timeline, that should be investigated by further scholarship. For instance, I explored gender and masculinity in the lodge using various feminist theories and sociological models, and I grounded this scholarship in what I saw and what was said and done in various spaces within the lodge. But there is still much unexplored discursive territory. I was unable to speak with any of the women involved with the Order of the Eastern Star, which is a Masonic concordant body intended for the female members of a Mason's family. Although men are free to join as well, it was traditionally intended for the wives and mothers of Masons, although the restrictions have loosened a bit over the past few years, and cousins of Masons can now join Ancient Lodge's OES chapter. This stands in stark contrast to Blue Lodge Masonry's meritocratic, anti-dynastic admissions guidelines, and that tension is worth exploring. Also, a Master Mason must be present to "open" and "close" all of their meetings, so the

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<sup>72</sup> There would also be tremendous infighting, and I could easily see a lot of lodges breaking up over this issue, and for Masons, this should be avoided at all costs. I imagine that it would be a bureaucratic nightmare to amend a Grand Lodge's usage of one of the *Constitutions*' foundational tenets, although I'm ignorant of how this would actually work.



OES seems to be firmly dependent on men and Masonry.<sup>73</sup> But if another anthropologist used a similar approach as this ethnography, they might explore what the members of OES talk about and how they do it. What's important to them? How does OES influence their relationships outside of the lodge, both with each other but also with the Masons in their lives? While I generally reject the practice of studying something's perceived Other to understand the original referent, perhaps by contrast, the OES could elucidate how gender (and its performance) works in Blue Lodge Masonry.

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In my section on Masonic documents, I examined the Petition and North Star Program, which are crucial to the initiation process, and I identify a few ideological substrates buried beneath the surface of those texts. I also used the 1723 *Constitutions* throughout my ethnography, mostly to establish what is officially Masonic and to see how my observations compare to that foundational text. But it is ripe for more extensive deconstruction, as it contains a mythic history of the brotherhood, along with a hefty list of by-laws, regulations, and a few songs. There are many other types of documents that can be unpacked as well. Masonic libraries, such as the Livingston Masonic Library in New York City, house numerous records, edicts, and philosophical inquiries, and the ideological subtexts and implications found within those texts can further elucidate the history and ethos of Freemasonry. Also, Masonic lodges record all of their business meetings, noting who was in attendance and what was decided, and these texts could be essential for an ethnography that explores the bureaucratic structure and mechanisms of a Masonic lodge. Because I became a Master Mason recently, I've only been able to attend one business meeting. As such, my observations

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<sup>73</sup> It was also founded by a man in the mid 1800s.

<sup>74</sup> This can be problematic, however, as women should not be used as some kind of mirror or tool to better understand men. While epistemologically flawed (masculinity and femininity are not always binary opposites), this method could also further reify women's discursive subordination to men if the study does not situate the OES as its own sociality comprised of various lived realities.

contained in this ethnography are first impressions. Even so, it appears that their business meetings, and the various gestures and patterns of speech found within them, theatrically mimic the state, specifically a courtroom. So further analysis, perhaps with a lens rooted in the anthropology of the state, could be devoted to what these meetings consist of, how they're structured, what lies beneath the surface, and how they're significant to Masons.

While I briefly discussed veterans and the military, mostly in the subsection on the Table Lodge, there is certainly more to be analyzed and written about. Most of the conversations I had at the lodge were during poker games, and none of those guys have served in the military, so I never got around to fleshing out this facet of my ethnography and Masonry more broadly. But it's clear that Ancient Lodge, and many others, venerates the U.S. military and its veterans, and I presume that the fraternal relationships cultivated in Masonic lodges can provide something similar to those found in the armed services. I wonder still how Masonry helps veterans acclimate back to civilian life; this could be an interesting ethnographic focus.

Finally, I was able to personally get to know Bill quite well outside of the context of the lodge. Meeting one-on-one in his home helped us develop an interpersonal bond distinct from a group hang out. But besides him, I was unable to build similar relationships that transcended the walls of the lodge with any of the other guys. As such, my observations of their lives and identities are limited by this fact. Knowing each of them on a more intimate level, and over a longer period of time, would certainly increase the breath of this ethnography, or of any future works. Expanding the field to incorporate these countless other spaces would no doubt produce more instances demanding analysis, either with the frameworks used here or new ones entirely.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> And perhaps one may find a bit of ancient wisdom if he or she knows how to see (and where to look).

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