

What Is A Grand Lodge?

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We are all well aware that “A Lodge is a certain number of Free and Accepted Masons duly assembled with a Holy Bible, Square and Compasses, and a Charter or Warrant from some Grand Lodge empowering them to work¹.” We also know that the “certain number” is 3, 5 or 7 depending on the degree of the Lodge. But this still leaves a logical question unresolved: What is a Grand Lodge and where does it get the authority to issue charters or warrants?

Harold V.B. Voorhis, who was a noted Masonic author and speaker in the mid-20th Century, apparently believed that a Grand body required as many subordinate bodies as the subordinate bodies required members to open. When he formed the *Grand Council of Knight Masons in the USA*, he strove to have nine councils, since nine members are needed to open a Council of Knight Masons². By this logic, it would seem that something between 3 and 7 lodges should be represented to create a new Grand Lodge.

I suspect that we are all familiar with the fact that the first body to be titled as a Grand Lodge was formed on June 24, 1717 at the Goose and Gridiron Ale House in St. Paul’s Churchyard, London. Not being shy, they adopted the name *Grand Lodge of England*, although there were only four London lodges in the body. Their authority was the mutual consent of the lodges involved, and their ability to issue warrants was an assumed one, and there being no other “Grand Lodge,” recognition was not a consideration. From this precedent, it is clear that four is a sufficient number of Lodges to form a Grand Lodge, but is it the necessary number?

From the history of Mother Kilwinning Lodge No. 0, it would seem that in some circumstances a single

lodge may act as a Grand Lodge. Kilwinning Lodge for many years issued charters to other lodges. The charter of Cannongate-Kilwinning Lodge dated 1735 replaces their original charter of 1677 and that of Tappahannock Lodge in Virginia was issued in 1758. In these charters, Kilwinning appears to be creating branch lodges³ — hence its “Mother Lodge” designation. Kilwinning drew its authority from the Schaw Statutes of 1599. These had been issued by William Schaw, the Master of Work to the King of Scotland, and among other things, clarified the authority and power of the Master of Kilwinning Lodge to control the operative lodges in his area. The 2nd Schaw Statute of 1599, states:

(3) Agreeably to "former ancient liberties," the warden of Kilwinning shall be present at the election of wardens within the limits of the lower ward of Cliddisdale, Glasgow, Ayr, and the district of Carrik. Furthermore, the warden and deacon of Kilwinning shall have authority to convene the wardens within the indicated jurisdiction, when anything of importance is to be done, such meetings to be held at Kilwinning or any other place in the western part of Scotland included in the described bounds, as the warden and deacon of Kilwinning may appoint.⁴

Since most of the early American Grand Lodges formed during and after the American Revolution were reconstitutions of the pre-existing Provincial Grand Lodges, they do not present much material for consideration in relation to my questions. Typically, at a Provincial Grand Lodge communication a resolution was adopted stating that the former ties were rescinded and the Provincial Grand Lodge

¹ Manual of Work, Grand Lodge of Virginia

² When Kilwinning Council No. 62 in Ohio was prevented from taking part, thereby reducing the number to 8, Great Chief’s Council No. 0 was chartered to make the ninth.

³ See Coil article on “Cannongate-Kilwinning Lodge”

⁴ Quoted on

<http://www.linshaw.ca/omtp/vol6no2.html>.

adjourned *sine die*, to immediately reconvene as a new Grand Lodge owing allegiance to no one.⁵

Here in Virginia there was no active Provincial Grand Lodge, so five lodges took the matter in their own hands and created the Grand Lodge of Virginia by mutual consent in 1778. (Only three were actually represented at the initial meeting.)⁶

By today's standards, it takes three lodges to create a new Grand Lodge, but in the past this was sometimes difficult. The Grand Lodge of New Hampshire was formed in 1790 with both of the lodges in the state represented. It received recognition, and continues to this day.⁷

In the State of New Jersey the leaders of the Provincial Grand Lodge apparently were Tories and declined to replace the Provincial Grand Lodge. In 1787 the brethren of New Jersey convened a General Assembly of fifty "Master Masons proved by due trial and strict examination." This convention declared that it being necessary to have a grand lodge, the Grand Lodge of New Jersey was thereby created. In subsequent meetings they elected officers, and issued new charters. This is the only instance in which a Grand Lodge was formed by individual Master Masons not acting as representatives of their Lodges. M.W. Harold D. Elliott, Past Grand Master of New Jersey, once commented to me that the New Jersey Grand Lodge was probably illegal, but the statute of limitations had run out!

Having three lodges can be a trial even when many more than three are present. For example: In California a meeting was held in March 1850 to discuss the formation of a Grand Lodge. Four lodges were present: Western Star No. 58 with a Missouri charter, Connecticut No. 175 with a Connecticut charter, New Jersey Lodge UD with a New Jersey Charter and Pacific Lodge UD who neglected to bring their charter. These representatives agreed to form the "Grand Lodge of Free & Accepted Ancient York Masons of California." A month later, there

was a problem raised — the Pacific Lodge charter had been issued by the Grand Lodge of Ancient York Masons of Louisiana which at that time was considered clandestine by Missouri, and there was doubt that a UD lodge could participate in forming a Grand Lodge. Fortunately, California Lodge No. 13 was present with its charter from the District of Columbia. This provided three regular charters. The new Grand Lodge was established, and new charters were issued, making all five lodges regular and recognized — at least by the Grand Lodge of California.

So what number of lodges is required to form a Grand Lodge? The original Grand Lodge of England had four lodges taking part. The Grand Lodge of Munster, Ireland and the Grand Lodge of York in England each appear to have consisted of only one lodge. The Grand Lodge of Ireland may have had six lodges at its founding — the original records are lost. Thirty-three lodges met in Edinburgh and constituted the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736, but Mother Kilwinning Lodge No. 0 exercised the chartering powers of a Grand Lodge as late as 1807, both while a part of the Grand Lodge and while separated from the Grand Lodge over a dispute concerning Kilwinning's precedence. The Ancient Grand Lodge apparently felt that five lodges were necessary. However, since the mid-1800s there has been a general opinion that at least three regularly chartered lodges must take part. What we can learn from this is that there is no magic formula — a Grand Lodge derives its regularity from the consent of the participating lodges and the recognition of other Grand Lodges. The precise numerical criteria vary with time and circumstance.

⁵ Webb's *The Freemason's Monitor* has some interesting articles on several of these meetings.

⁶ Richard A. Rutyna and Peter C. Stewart, *The History of Freemasonry in Virginia*

⁷ The comments that follow are based on the respective state articles in Coil's Encyclopedia

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R.'.W.'. Ossian Lang, Grand Historian, G.L. of Scotland, quoted on
<http://www.linshaw.ca/omtp/vol6no2.html>
Linshaw Enterprises has a number of interesting articles posted.

