

The Antients, The Moderns, And The Revolutionary War – A Clash Of Ideals

By

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Benjamin Franklin's numerous achievements in life, despite humble beginnings, still stand as an embodiment of the American dream. According to his curriculum vitae, he was a printer, a scientist, an inventor, a diplomat, a writer, a business strategist, an abolitionist, and the sage of Philadelphia and the Constitutional Convention. Franklin's masonic accomplishments are many and include twice a Provincial Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, helping draft the bylaws of Pennsylvania's St. John's Lodge¹, printing the first American edition of Anderson's *Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, helping lay the cornerstone of the Pennsylvania State House (Independence Hall), and being key to the building and dedication of Philadelphia's "Freemasons Lodge", which is America's first Masonic building².

While serving the Colonial cause as a Commissioner of the Continental Congress in Paris during the American Revolutionary War years, Franklin managed to elicit French loans, arranged for Americans to escape from Britain, coordinated American warships, and acted as an arms dealer, among many other feats. He also quite deftly navigated and leveraged the fame and acclaim in which the French aristocracy, social elites, and Parisians in general held him.³

It is likely that Franklin's Masonic ties were the wellsprings of his runaway fame and popularity in France at that time, and he formed associations with several of the country's Masonic Lodges. These ties placed him at the center of influential circles that included Voltaire and Madame Helvetius, whose husband, the philosopher Claude-Adrien Helvetius, envisioned the concept of the prominent French masonic Lodge, Loge des Neuf Soeurs (Lodge of the Nine Sisters, or Nine Muses). This Lodge proved influential in garnering support for the American Revolution. Not only did Franklin join this Lodge, but also he was elected its master in 1779 and again in 1780. He later became a member of Loge de Saint Jean de Jerusalem in 1782 and was made an honorary member of Loge des bons Amis (Lodge of Good Friends) the following year.^{4, 5} On St. John's Day in 1786, in a sermon delivered in Philadelphia's St. Paul's Church at the request of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania, Franklin was described as "an illustrious Brother whose distinguished merit among Masons entitles him to their highest veneration"⁶.

Benjamin Franklin's almost six-decades-long Masonic journey was replete with Masonic accolades and

honors at the highest levels, given to him both at home and abroad.

Franklin died in 1790. His funeral was held on April 21st of that year. Just under half of

“All the Clergy of the city, before the Corpse.
THE CORPSE,

Carried by Citizens,
The Pall supported by The President of the State,
the Chief Justice, the President of the [National] Bank,
Samuel Powel, William Bingham, and David Rittenhouse, Esq's.

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Consisting of the family of the deceased – with a number

of particular friends,
The Secretary and Members of the Supreme Executive Council.
The Speaker & Members of the General Assembly.

Judges of the [State] Supreme Court,
And other Officers of Government.

The Gentlemen of the Bar.

Philadelphia’s population of 42,000 watched its procession, which, according to *The Massachusetts*

Centinel dated May 1st, 1790, consisted of the following order:

The Mayor and Corporation of the city of Philadelphia.

The *Printers* of the city, with their Journeymen and Apprentices.

The Philosophical Society.

The College of Physicians.

The Cincinnati.

The College of Philadelphia.

Sundry other Societies – together with a numerous

and respectable body of Citizens.”⁷

Where were the Freemasons? Were they grouped into the “Sundry other Societies” category that was part of the Funeral Procession? No, they were not. It’s quite remarkable how many Pennsylvania Freemasons attended this stately, somber, and silent march through the city.

There were none. Zero. Not only did no Pennsylvania Masonic Lodges take part but also Franklin’s death was never acknowledged by them. How could this have been? What happened? The answer to those questions is found in the history of the Craft and how the American Revolutionary War significantly impacted its development.

Freemasonry primarily came to the American colonies in the same manner as it did in many other locations under British control – through its army. Every regiment in the army supported at least one traveling Lodge. Consequently, Freemasons in the army helped found permanent Lodges within the civilian population

where these soldiers were stationed. Those civilians interested in the Craft would often be involved in the meetings of a military Lodge, and that Lodge would initiate those candidates.⁸

To better organize and administer this growing network of Lodges across the globe, Grand Lodges expanded the number of Provincial Grand Lodges. The first known Lodge meeting in the North American colonies was held in 1730, and that year also saw the appointments of a Provincial Grand Master (Daniel Coxe of New Jersey) for New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. In 1733, another Provincial Grand Master, Henry Price of Boston, was appointed for all of New England. It was during this period that Benjamin Franklin was initiated, and he effectively became one of the Brethren who introduced America to Masonry.^{9, 10}

Emigrants to America also brought their Freemason practices with them and requested warrants from a Grand Lodge to establish their own local Lodges. Thus, the combination of regimental Lodges, immigration from the British Isles, and the formulation of Provincial Grand Lodges created a network of Lodges across not only America but also the British Empire.¹¹

The establishment of the world's first Grand Lodge, the Premier Grand Lodge, took place only about 15 years before Franklin was initiated a Mason. It initially consisted of four Lodges of primarily operative Masons joining together; only one Lodge's members were majority speculative.¹² The next several decades saw gradual changes to administration, ritual, and ceremony so that by the early 1750s a schism appeared in the form of a rival English Grand Lodge, known as the Antients (or Ancients). The formation of this new grand Lodge was largely the result of the actions of Irish Masons in London.

Irishmen by the thousands had made the journey to England, starting in the 1740s, to escape famine, disease, and to find work. The Freemasons among this influx into England desired to start their own Lodges in lieu of petitioning existing ones. The implications of these actions were significant and ultimately spread far from London and the British Isles. The English Grand Lodge at this time was an exemplar of bureaucratic inefficiency; it was overextended, sluggish, and offered poor leadership. As a result, it did not immediately challenge the formation of these new Irish Lodges, six of which existed by the 1750s.¹³

Why else might these new Irish not wish to join an existing English Lodge? Quite simply, most of them couldn't; an English Lodge would not have them. Masonry was no different than other societies in England at this time, where a Grand Master only ruled and governed until a member of the Nobility was found to be a sponsor. Once such an aristocrat assumed the mantle of Grand Master, he naturally gravitated toward members of his own class in society, and, therefore, filled the Grand offices with other aristocrats. This type of behavior had been codified via resolutions passed by Grand Masters and their Officers that provided a means not only to select all Grand Lodge officers from the Nobility or aristocracy but also to sell and purchase Warrants. The consequence was that Freemasonry became a doppelganger of the structure of British nobility, where the few controlled the fate of the many.¹⁴

English Masons not of the Nobility took offense at the changes being foisted upon them. They claimed the spirit and impact of the changes and leadership structure were too fundamental and not in concert with the traditional concepts of Freemasonry. These Brothers began to chafe at the social elitism, lack of egalitarianism, and abandonment of

fraternal equality displayed at some Lodges. So, they left the Premier Grand Lodge. Whole Lodges followed. Many of the English Masons joined the disaffected Irish Masons in seeking out or forming other Lodges. These new and alternate existing Lodges were based on the tenets of traditional or “Antient” Masonry. Due to the slow and uncertain nature of communications in this era, deployed British military Lodges, as well as rural country Lodges, had little interaction with the Premier Grand Lodge, and these Lodges tended to also adhere to the Antient form of Freemasonry.¹⁵

A large group of around one hundred members of the various Irish Lodges met in Soho in 1751 and the result was the creation of the Grand Committee of the Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons. Thus, the Grand Lodge of England was born, According To The Old Institutions, as the challenger to the Masonic authority of the Premier Grand Lodge of England. The Soho group was organized, disciplined, and administratively gifted. This new Grand Lodge became known as the Antient Grand Lodge and in three years had thirty-six affiliated Lodges. One of the differences in these Antient Lodges was the acceptance of men from the middle class of society, such as tradesmen, shopkeepers, and artisans.¹⁶

In 1752, Laurence Dermott, an educated Irish Catholic, was elected Grand Secretary of the Antient Grand Lodge. He was a member of an Irish Lodge in Dublin and had been one of the many Irish who emigrated to England during the 1740s, arriving in 1748. He plied a trade as a journeyman painter in London and later remade himself into a successful wine merchant.¹⁷

Dermott served as Grand Secretary for almost twenty years. He was an eloquent speaker with strong organizational skills. To support the

fledgling new Grand Lodge, Dermott wrote its own constitution, *Ahiman Rezon* (there are many possible translations, one of which being “faithful brother Secretary”¹⁸), and used it, among many purposes, to remind those Brethren under the auspices of the Antient Grand Lodge that many Biblical and historical figures had risen to fame from humble beginnings. This lesson would have been especially poignant for those Brothers who were not Nobles, aristocrats, wealthy, hyper-educated, or among the social elite, the kind that typically comprised a Moderns Lodge.¹⁹

Four years after the creation of the Antient Grand Committee, the Premier Grand Lodge had enough and declared the Antients not only as being irregular Masons but also low class to boot. The Premier Grand Lodge viewed the membership of the Antient Lodges as unseemly. The Antients retorted that the Grand Lodge’s liberal following of rituals was irregular; indeed its very formation was so. Since the Antients felt that the Premier Grand Lodge was not following the constitution, ceremony, and rituals of Masonry as traditionally defined, they termed them as “Moderns”. The name stuck, much to the consternation of the Premier Grand Lodge.

The grievances the Antients had with the Moderns were formalized as follows:

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- (a) *Transposed the modes of recognition in the First and Second Degrees.*
- (b) *Omitted prayers.*
- (c) *De-Christianized the ritual, Anderson’s “Constitutions” of 1723 being offered as proof.*
- (d) *Ignored and neglected the Saints’ Days – that is, with holding their*

festivals on days that were not the days of St. John.

(e) Omitted in some cases to prepare Candidates in the customary way.

(f) Abbreviated the ritual, in particular having neglected the so-called lectures, actually catechisms, attached to each degree.

(g) Ceased to recite the Ancient Charges at Initiations.

(h) Introduced austerity into the ceremonies, in particular having no place for the sword in the Initiation ceremony, except that the Tyler

The list of grievances showed that the divide between the Antients and the Moderns was fundamental, specific, and wrought with emotion. The Antients' struggle against the Moderns was also reflective of what was simultaneously occurring in European and Colonial society.

By the time of the Revolutionary War in the Colonies, the period of the Enlightenment had been underway for many decades in Europe. It was a time of social upheaval as a religious and royal rule began to yield to a democratic and less concentrated form of governance, which in turn promulgated the opportunity for society to openly express new, potentially revolutionary ideas: ideas such as opportunities and rewards due to merit as opposed to birthright, the intermingling of people of widely dissimilar social backgrounds, government by the consent of the governed, and religious toleration.²¹

The colonists in the New World, inspired and guided by the precepts of the Enlightenment, strove to "dissolve the political bands" with the old ruling structure and create a nation where "... all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain

(and the Inner Tyler, where there was one) wore a sword.

(i) Allowed the esoteric ceremony at the installation of a Master to fall into disuse, although some of their Lodges did work such a ceremony at an early date and continued unofficially to do so.

(j) Departed from the ancient method of arranging the Lodge.

(k) Ignored the Deacon.

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unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” In the confluence of these brackish ideals, Antient Freemasonry aligned powerfully with the concepts espoused in the burgeoning American Republic.²² Generally, during the American Revolutionary War, loyalist Brethren tended to associate with the Moderns, while patriots, with great fervor, upheld the tenets of the Antients branch of Masonry. The British brand of Freemasonry supported the idea that all its members should view themselves as brethren, but did not teach that the Brethren were equals. The Antient version of Masonry was far more egalitarian within its ranks.²³

While there was almost an equal mix of loyalist and patriot Brothers, many of the loyalist Brethren fled the American colonies on ships to various locales, most of them back to England. An example of such an exodus is the sailing ship *Brothers*, owned by two British Masons who were also brothers by blood (a double entendre, perhaps?), employed to take fellow Masons and their families back to England.²⁴ Other Modern Lodges just stopped meeting, especially in cities such as Boston and Philadelphia when in control by the Continental Army. Meanwhile, many Antient Brothers

called upon their Brethren to fight for the cause of Independence in many and sundry ways. Such acts were not sanctioned by Lodges, as that went against the rules and laws of the Craft, but individual Masons did answer the calls. An example of the strong connection between Antient Freemasonry and the patriots of the American Revolution took place in Boston on December 16, 1773. On this date, St. Andrew's Lodge, an Antient Lodge, held a scheduled meeting at the Green Dragon Tavern, but only five Brothers, all officers, attended. While the Lodge was in session, the waters of the nearby Boston Harbor were being filled with tea from the cargo holds of three large "Indiamen" ships. Might the purpose of the meeting have been to act as a cover for those Lodge members who played a part in the Boston Tea Party?²⁵

The Green Dragon Tavern was not only the Masonic hall of the Boston Antients but also the venue for several patriot revolutionary groups, including the North End Caucus and the Sons of Liberty. The latter group's membership included St. Andrew's Senior Grand Warden, Paul Revere, and three other Lodge members, while St. Andrew's Worshipful Master, Joseph Warren, was a member of the North End Caucus. In aligning itself with the patriots, the Lodge did lose some loyalist members, but it grew its ranks dramatically with patriots; almost one hundred of them joined St. Andrew's between 1777 and 1780.²⁶

So, why did Pennsylvania Freemasonry reject the world-renowned Benjamin Franklin? In Pennsylvania, the antipathy the Antients had toward the Moderns was especially fierce. From the late 1750s to 1785, while Franklin was living overseas and later serving there on behalf of the American Revolutionary cause, the Antients had grown from one Lodge in 1757 to controlling virtually the entire Masonic infrastructure of the colony.²⁷ It did not matter enough that Franklin was a Founding Father

and a key factor in the success of the American Revolution, he was a Modern Mason, with a history of elitist leanings, who considered himself a citizen of the world. Indeed some of his ideas seemed somewhat imperialistic – from efforts in support of a public religion in concert with the ideals of latitudinarianism (use of reason to inform theological interpretation and judgment²⁸) to a plan to assemble the elite thinkers of the world into a Masonic inspired "United Party for Virtue".²⁹ Ultimately, it was likely a battle mindset the Pennsylvania Antient Masons held in 1790 that was responsible for the complete repudiation of such an accomplished and revered figure in America, whose works, discoveries, and ideas are still relevant today. It would be twenty-three years before such a mindset officially ended.

By the turn of the 19th century, if the battle between the Antients and the Moderns is measured by the number of Lodges warranted, the Antients won handily. Their acceptance of men of high character from the artisan class, the support from military Lodges, their common connection to the Republican values and vision of the Patriot American colonists, and the many missteps and bureaucratic inefficiencies of their foe, simply overwhelmed the Moderns. This, despite the efforts of the Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge, elected in 1764, Cadwallader, the ninth Lord of Blayney. He was a professional soldier that served in the British Army and from whence he was initiated a Mason. Consequently, he was likely inculcated with an Antient ethos, and he actually tried to reconcile the two camps. Cadwallader bolstered the health of the Moderns in many ways, including constituting seventy-four Lodges and clearing the path for Royal Arch Masonry in England. His effectiveness, however, likely prolonged the Antients and Moderns confrontation.^{30, 31, 32} The recognition of significant efforts at reconciliation is due to the brothers Edward, Duke of Kent (a Grand Master of the Antients

Grand Lodge) and Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex (a Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge of England), as well as the Earl of Moira. It took several years after their initial attempt in 1789 to get to reconciliation.³³

Reconciliation officially occurred at Freemason's Hall in London on St. John's Day, December 27, 1813. The seating arrangements saw that the members of the Antients and the Moderns were intermixed. The opening of the respective Grand Lodges was held in separate adjoining rooms. A procession of the members of both Grand Lodges entered the Hall, where the Grand Masters were placed on each side of the Hall's throne. An Act of Union was read and then ratified. The Grand Chaplin then read a proclamation:

*"Be it known to all Men, That the Act of Union between the two Grand Lodges of Free and Accepted Masons of England, is solemnly signed, sealed, ratified, and confirmed, and the two Fraternities are one, to be from hence-forth known and acknowledged by the style and title of THE UNITED GRAND LODGE OF ANCIENT FREEMASONS OF ENGLAND; and may the Great Architect of the Universe make their Union eternal!"*³⁴

An interesting aside of the reconciliation is the titles of Blue and Grand Lodges. Lodges may retain the title held prior to the formation of the United Grand Lodge of Ancient Freemasons Of England. In the United States, "Ancient Free & Accepted Masons", or "Free & Accepted Masons" or even some other variation can be found.³⁵ Grand Lodges of "Ancient Free & Accepted Masons" are found in:

Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri,

Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin.³⁶

Grand Lodges of "Free & Accepted Masons" are found in:

Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Washington, Wyoming.³⁷

The Antients, the Moderns, and the Revolutionary War – a battle of ideals, indeed. The crucible formed by this battle is responsible for creating the Craft we enjoy and respect today. While American Masonry has formed its own Grand Lodges, it is the inheritor and beneficiary of these hard-won ancestral tenets, laws, and traditions. How will we guard these foundations? Will they be altered to suit modern mores, styles, and realities? Should they be?

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