

**The History of the ‘Band of Brothers’ and its Implications for
Freemasons**

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Many of us have some knowledge of the phrase, “Band of Brothers,” but perhaps fewer of us have an understanding of the origin of that phrase and its historical usage. This paper will endeavor to provide insights into the usage of that phrase, the various principles expounded by it, and how those principles inform or should inform our Masonic Brotherhood.

The earliest known reference to a “band of brothers” may very well have been created by the greatest of English playwrights, William Shakespeare, in his famous history play, Henry V. In the scene where King Henry and his army are about to go into battle in 1415 against the French at Agincourt during the Feast of Crispian, his officers are lamenting the fact that they are outnumbered five to one and wishing there were more Englishmen to join in the battle. Henry gently chastises his officers for wishing so and offers his encouragement thusly:

“And Crispin Crispian shall ne’er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered --
We few, we happy few, we band of
brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother.ⁱ

Full of encouragement and aided by geography,ⁱⁱ the 6,000 Englishmen defeat the 30,000 Frenchmen. Though not militarily decisive, the victory at Agincourt won Henry important allies and earned him a hero’s welcome on his return to England.

Here then was a theme repeated throughout history – that of a military group that was obedient to a competent and charismatic leader and who regarded every other member of their group as family.

Since Freemasons begin their journey as Brothers, i.e., siblings in a family, ought we not to regard every other Freemason as a member of our family, attendant with all the rights, privileges, and responsibilities incumbent on members of a family?

A few hundred years pass before the next noteworthy use of the phrase occurs, this time by Lord Horatio Nelson. His career in the Royal Navy, from Midshipman to Vice Admiral is replete with exploits and injuries. In various battles, he lost sight in one eye, had his right arm amputated after being wounded by grapeshot, and was mortally wounded during the battle of Trafalgar.

While Nelson was a sea officer par excellence, there were many who struggled, suffered, and were wounded as often as he. This could not help but develop a close relationship among the

men. In his book ‘Nelson: the immortal memory,’ David Howarth writes:

“Nelson’s famous phrase was, ‘I had the happiness to command a band of brothers’ ... After his first great victory, Nelson called his captains ‘my darling children,’ and none was the least embarrassed by that ... the captains of the Mediterranean fleet were becoming a brotherhood, bonded by skill, experience, mutual respect, and a common cause...”ⁱⁱⁱ

As Freemasons, are we not bonded by that common set of experiences in the rituals we learn and execute and that mutual respect for each other, and the common causes of brotherly love and charity?

At the turn of the century into the 1800s, Joseph Hopkinson was a judge, author, and erstwhile poet who loved America and who wrote an anthem that rang throughout the nation. It was entitled Hail Columbia. The refrain for all four stanzas is:

“Firm, united, let us be,

Rallying around our Liberty;

As a band of brothers joined,

Peace and safety shall we find”^{iv}

Here we find an exhortation to joining in a common cause, being dedicated to the success of that cause, with the promise of a comfortable life. What parallels do we find in our common cause of Freemasonry? By practicing the tenets of Freemasonry, can we expect peace and safety or additional challenges?

A few decades later, Friedrich von Schiller, a German who dabbled in philosophy, history, and drama produced a play entitled Wilhelm Tell, which was more about a struggle for freedom of a

great nation than about a famous legendary-historical figure. In this work, we find another reference to a “band of brothers,” where he wrote:

“A band of brothers we swear to be,

Never to part in danger or death!”^v

Does our commitment to Freemasonry obligate us to stand fast in the face of dangerous adversity? Should it? How deep is our commitment to support or defend fellow Freemasons? Have we the faith in the eternal life that even death will not part us?

A few decades more bring us to Frederick Douglas, who was born a slave in Maryland. Douglas escaped from bondage and traveled to Massachusetts where he became involved in community and political activities. He especially agitated for the freedom and dignity of the slaves. Within the publication of his book, “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave”, he makes reference to a “band of brothers,” where he wrote:

“It is not uncommon to charge slaves with great treachery toward each other, and to believe them incapable of confiding in each other; but I must say, that I have never loved, esteemed, or confided in men, more than I did in these. They were as true as steel, and no band of brothers could have been more loving. There were no mean advantages taken of each other ... no tattling ... no giving each other bad names... and no elevating one at the expense of the other.”^{vi}

What an appropriate set of conduct that should be endemic among Freemasons! Respecting each other is a hallmark of Freemasonry ... or should be.

In the same era as Frederick Douglas, we find Stephen Douglas who, in debating Abraham Lincoln in 1858, also evoked the “band of brothers” theme, but in a different manner where he said,

“...Thus you see that whilst Whigs and Democrats fought [each other] fearlessly in old times about banks, the tariff, distribution, the specie circular, and the sub-treasury, all united as a band of brothers when the peace, harmony or integrity of the Union was imperiled.”^{vii}

While Freemasons may have their differences with each other in ritual practices or degree implementations, do we not – should we not – provide a united front when the peace, harmony, or integrity of the Craft is imperiled?

However, unlike previous and later evocations of the band of brothers, Steven Douglas does not use it to inspire, he uses it to wound. He tells his audience that Americans had at one time been a “band of brothers” fighting together for the good of the country, but now these nasty Republicans care more for the rights of individual black men than for the peace and tranquility of the country. Thus, Douglas excludes the Republicans from his band of brothers because they will not countenance slavery.

Freemasonry, by contrast, has made great strides in breaking down the barriers of exclusivity, recognizing that all men of good character are our brothers and are worthy of our respect, but there is still much work to be done.

In 1861, Harry McCarthy wrote song lyrics in celebration of the “The Bonnie Blue Flag” which was first flown in 1810. At the beginning of the Civil War, a crowd raised the flag over the Capitol of the State

of Mississippi. Harry McCarthy was evidently a witness to this event and was stirred to write the lyrics to the song, beginning with the first stanza:

“We are a band of brothers

And native to the soil

Fighting for our liberty

With treasure, blood and toil”^{viii}

Here we see the theme repeated where the phrase is again used to bond people together in a common cause, this time uniting the men of the Confederacy to defend their native land, fighting to maintain their sovereign states’ right to determine their own destiny.

Today, most Americans associate the phrase “band of brothers” with the 101st Airborne as it fought in World War II, largely because of the immensely popular book as well as the HBO TV Series. Although I do not remember the phrase being explicitly used in the televised series, several aspects of that experience exemplify all the best qualities of brotherhood.

The men of Easy Company were brought together, trained together, and joined together against a common enemy and, sometimes, against their own internal command structure. They went to war as a unit and supported each other in that deadly struggle.

I remember one poignant moment as Easy Company was attacking a German artillery position and Lieutenant Winters came across the body of one of his soldiers who had been killed in the assault. It was the first casualty of his unit and you could see his pain at the loss of one of his men. For

me, it was reminiscent of the pain I felt with the passing of a beloved Brother.

In later episodes, Easy Company gained replacements for the original members who had been wounded or killed. The original unit members, while they were hesitant to accept the replacements into their established brotherhood, took care of the new men and provided them with knowledge of the skills and tactics they would need to survive. Similarly, members of the Craft provide newly raised Brothers with a better understanding of the lessons to be derived from our rituals.

One interesting aspect of this last example is the theme music that introduced each segment of the series. It is simply and aptly entitled, “The Band of Brothers.” At the close of the 2019 Grand Royal Arch Chapter Convocation, the newly elected and appointed officers of the Grand Chapter proceeded in a column of twos into the meeting room, accompanied by The Band of Brothers being played by the Grand Chapter Musician. How appropriate and celebratory!

Thus we find throughout at least the last six hundred years, the common thread of the use of the term Band of Brothers is one of solidarity in a common cause, where men are joined together and identified as members of the same ‘family.’ In Freemasonry, we characterize our Gentle Craft as “The Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God.”

As Brothers, we owe special allegiance to one another, but it is not only Freemasons who expound that principle. In his book, *American Indian Freemasonry*, Arthur C. Parker writes of an inherent Masonry

rather than our current inductive Freemasonry, where he writes:

“Among many tribes the custom of having a sworn brother was observed. Each was responsible for the punishment of any encroachment or injury upon the other. Companies of these brothers often united in associations, which in no uncertain sense were fraternities.”^{ix}

In closing let me quote our esteemed Brother Alfred Pike on the topic of the duties and responsibilities of Brotherhood:

“There can be no genuine Brotherhood without mutual regard, good opinion and esteem, mutual charity, and the mutual allowance for faults and failings. It is only those who learn habitually to think better of each other, to look habitually for the good that is in each other, and expect, allow for, and overlook, the evil, who can be Brethren one of another, in any true sense of the word.

Those who gloat over the failings of one another, who think each other to be naturally base and low, of a nature in which the Evil predominates and excellence is not to be looked for, cannot be even friends, and much less Brethren.”^x

Strong words. When we have words that should cause each of us to introspectively examine the Tenets of Freemasonry and the language in the many Obligations we have sworn on bended knee before the Grand Architect of the Universe, only then may we truly be a member of We Few, We Happy Few, We Band of Brothers.

So mote it be.

ⁱ <http://www.indepthinfo.com/band-of-brothers/henry-v.shtml>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Agincourt>: Early in the morning on October 25 (the feast day of St. Crispin), 1415, Henry positioned his army for battle on a recently

plowed field bounded by woods. His men-at-arms were stationed in the center, flanked by wedges of archers who carried longbows that had an effective range of 250 yards. The terrain favored Henry's army and disadvantaged its opponent, as it reduced the numerical advantage of the French army by narrowing the front. This would prevent [flanking] maneuvers that might overwhelm the English ranks.

ⁱⁱⁱ Howarth, David, Lord Nelson: the immortal memory, Conway Maritime Press, London, 1997

^{iv} [http://sweetslyrics.com/86276.American Songs-Hail Columbia.html](http://sweetslyrics.com/86276.American%20Songs-Hail%20Columbia.html)

^v www.indepthinfo.com/band-of-brothers/schiller.shtml

^{vi} Douglass, Frederick, Narrative Of The Life Of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Anti-Slavery Office, Boston, 1846

^{vii} <http://www.indepthinfo.com/band-of-brothers/stephen-douglas.shtml>

^{viii} www.songlyrics.com/derek-warfield/the-bonnie-blue-flag-lyrics

^{ix} Parker, Arthur C., American Indian Freemasonry, Cornerstone Book Publishers, New Orleans, 2013, p. 13.

^x Pike, Alfred. Morals and Dogma of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry, Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, I. H. Jenkins, Inc., Richmond, New and Revised Edition 1930, pp. 856-857.

