

Butler Lodge Short Takes Volume III

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The Scottish Rite: Not Really Scottish at All

The Scottish Rite is a concordant body within Freemasonry that Master Masons may elect to join once they've completed their third degree. Concordant bodies, in contrast to appendant bodies, are groups that "expand and elaborate" on the lessons taught in the first three degrees of Freemasonry. The Scottish Rite offers twenty-nine additional degrees of instruction, which are in the form of small stage productions that are usually presented to groups of candidates in a theater setting; complete with costumes, makeup, sound, and special-effects. Because of the time and expense involved in the stage productions, the Scottish Rite only accepts new members once or twice a year in what they call "reunions." The Scottish Rite also offers an additional "honorary" 33rd degree, which is given to members who have performed extraordinary service to the Scottish Rite, Freemasonry in general, or to humanity.

Prior to the year 2000, candidates who wanted to become Shriners needed to complete the twenty-nine degrees of the Scottish Rite before being accepted. This is no longer a requirement.

Scottish Origins?

The Scottish Rite did not come from Scotland, and members do not have to be of Scottish descent. Rather, the Scottish Rite is descended from a French group called "Order of the Royal Secret," which came to the West Indies in the late 1700s, and was a "twenty-five degree" system. In 1802, the "Scottish Rite" was formed in Charleston South Carolina with John Mitchell as its first "Sovereign Grand Commander."

Twenty-Nine Degrees

The Scottish Rite expanded upon the Twenty-five Degrees of the "Order of the Royal Secret," creating its own twenty-nine degrees system. **Note:** The Scottish Rite, nor any other independent or concordant body of Masonry, does not confer the first three degrees of Masonry, which are the sole providence of State Masonic Grand Lodges.

Editor's Note: We preserved the wording of the original article. To clarify, in Grand Lodges within the United States, the Scottish Rite is an appendant, or "concordant" body using Missouri terms. Elsewhere in the world, the Scottish Rite is an actual Masonic Rite, and does confer the first three degrees. You do not join a Blue Lodge prior to joining the Scottish Rite. Louisiana is also an exception, but that is outside the scope of this article.

Worldwide, Scottish Rite Freemasonry is organized into "Jurisdictions," each led by a Supreme Council which has sovereign authority in its Jurisdiction. The United States is divided into two Scottish Rite Jurisdictions: The Southern Jurisdiction (SJ) and the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction (NMJ). The SJ was the original founding jurisdiction and refers to itself as "Mother Council of the World," consisting of the thirty-five states south of the Mason-Dixon line and West of the Ohio River. It is headquartered at the House of the Temple in Washington, D.C., less than a mile from the White House. The NMJ is headquartered in Lexington, Massachusetts.

Size Difference

There is a simple explanation for the size discrepancy between the SJ and the NMJ: When the Scottish Rite split into two jurisdictions, the country was much smaller than it is today, and the two jurisdictions were roughly equal size. However, the Southern Jurisdiction, as the original founding body, retained the right over any new states joining the union and continued to grow as the country expanded.

Editor's Note: The author did not acknowledge the Prince Hall Scottish Rite, which also consists of a Northern and Southern Jurisdiction. All four of these American Scottish Rite bodies met in September 2022 and signed a Statement of Unity, recognizing each other.

The 33rd Degree

The 33rd degree is the most talked about and misunderstood aspect of Freemasonry by non-Masons. Many people, even those who have never met a Freemason, have heard of the 33rd degree. It is important to understand that when someone says they are a 33rd degree Mason, they're actually saying that they are a 33rd degree, Scottish Rite Mason. The Scottish Rite is the only recognized body that confers the 33rd degree.

The 33rd degree is an honorary degree that is conferred on members of the Scottish Rite who have contributed great service to the Scottish Rite, to Freemasonry in general, or to humanity itself. Recipients of the 33rd degree are chosen by the Scottish Rite Supreme Council at its biannual meeting in Washington, D.C.

In order to receive the 33rd degree, Freemasons must first complete their three Lodge (craft) degrees and then join the Scottish Rite and receive the 32nd degree. Once a Scottish Rite Mason has held the 32nd degree for forty-six months, they are eligible to be nominated to receive the status of "Knight Commander Court of Honor" or K.C.C.H.

A mason who has held the rank of "Knight Commander Court of Honor" for forty-six months is eligible to be elected to the 33rd degree. It is forbidden for Masons to ask for either K.C.C.H. or 33rd degree status, and incidentally any request or suggestion is automatically rejected. The 33rd degree would represent a form of Masonic "lifetime achievement award." Only two percent

of Scottish Rite Freemasons are holders of the 33rd degree with four percent at KCCH status.

Editor's Note: The K.C.C.H. or "Red Hat" is only within the Southern Jurisdiction of the United States, while the 33rd degree or "White Hat" is universal to Scottish Rite – but it is not a White Hat in every Jurisdiction.

Within the Scottish Rite, only 33rd degree members may serve on certain boards and committees and are eligible to be nominated to a higher office within the Scottish Rite.

A recipient of the 33rd degree is entitled to wear a white Scottish Rite cap to official meetings and a 33rd degree ring—a triple band of gold with the number thirty-three inside a black equilateral triangle. He also has the right to sign 33rd degree next his name in official Masonic documents. Notable holders of the 33rd degree status are Presidents Harry S. Truman and Gerald R. Ford, astronaut Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin, entertainers Audie Murphy, Ernest Borgnine, and Red Skelton, and industrialist Henry Ford.

The York Rite

The York Rite – similar to the Scottish Rite – is a concordant body within Freemasonry that Master Masons may join once they have completed their third degree. Concordant bodies, in contrast to appendant bodies, are groups that "expand and elaborate" on the lessons taught in the first three degrees of Freemasonry. The York Rite is named for the York region of England, where it is believed that Freemasonry originated. Unlike the other Masonic Rites, The York Rite is made up of three independently organized and governed bodies with their own state and national headquarters. The three bodies are the Royal Arch, the Council of Cryptic Masons, and the Knights Templar. Although the three groups are independent of each other, they work closely together and often coordinate their actions and schedules. The York Rite offers a total of ten additional degrees of instruction that a Freemason can experience: four from the Royal Arch, three from the Cryptics, and three from the Knights Templar.

An applicant is not required to join all three bodies of the York Rite, although they are usually required to join the Royal Arch before they can apply to the other two.

The Royal Arch

The Royal Arch offers the following extra Masonic degrees: Mark Master Mason, Virtual Past Master, Most Excellent Master, Holy Royal Arch. It divides itself into local, state, and a General Grand Chapter, headquartered in Greenfield, Indiana, which was founded on October 24th, 1797.

The Council of Cryptic Masons

The General Grand Council of Cryptic Masons was organized in the United States) in Meridian, Indiana, on August 25th, 1880. It offers the following extra degrees to Freemasons: Royal Master, Select Master, and Super Excellent Master.

The Knights Templar

Although Freemasonry is open to persons of any religion, membership in Knights Templar branch of the York Rite is exclusive to Christians. A local Knights Templar division is called a Commandery, which falls under the jurisdiction of a State Grand Commandery. State Grand Commanderies fall under the jurisdiction of The Grand Encampment, which is located in Bellaire, TX. The Knights Templar are best known for their uniform and elaborate sword drilling teams, which participate in parades, drill competitions, and other public exhibitions. The Knights Templar offers the following extra degrees: The Illustrious Order of the Red Cross, The Passing Order of St. Paul, and The Order of the Knights of Malta.

Shriners: The Playground of Masonry

The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles and the Mystic Shrine, now called Shriners International, is perhaps the most popular and publicly recognized body of Freemasonry. The "Shrine" is an appendant body of Freemasonry, in contrast to a concordant body, because it does not elaborate or expand upon the three (blue or symbolic) Lodge degrees.

The Shriners were founded in 1870 by New York Freemasons Dr. Walter M. Fleming and actor William J. Florence, who frequented the Knickerbocker Cottage in New York City. Fleming and Florence were inspired by a Middle Eastern musical comedy that Florence had seen performed in Marseille. They gave officers over-the-top Arabic sounding names, adopted the large red "Fez" as the fraternity's headgear, and declared all their members to be "Nobles".

The Shriners proved to be very popular, and by 1888 there were forty-two Shrine Centers and more than 7,200 members. By 1900, the Shriners had expanded to eighty-two centers and over 55,000 members.

After the polio outbreaks in the early 20th century the Shriners began assessing each member a two dollar per year fee to build the first Shriners Hospitals for Children (originally called the Shriners Hospital for Crippled Children). The first one opened in Shreveport Louisiana in 1922. Through the years, the Shriners hospitals have expanded from treating children with orthopedic conditions to burns and spinal cord injuries. The Shriners

Hospitals offer medical care regardless of their parent's ability to pay. The twenty-two Shriners Hospitals for children cost \$1.7 million per day to operate.

The Shriners organize themselves into Shrine Centers, located in most major cities. The head of a Shrine Center is called the "Potentate," and members subdivide themselves into "units" or "clubs" based on personal interests, such as classic cars, motorcycle clubs, entertainers, aviators, etc. Along with ground transportation, the Shriners operated several aviator wings that provide free transportation for children to Shriners hospitals. Shriners are also very active in local parades and the Shriners Circus is one of the most visible fundraising arms, traveling the country each year. The annual East-West Shrine game has been played every January since 1925.

Until 2000, in order for a Freemason to become a Shriner they had to first join either the York Rite or Scottish Rite and go through their degree systems. This is no longer a requirement and members may join directly after receiving their three Lodge degrees.