

# Notes on Royal Arch Masonry in Virginia

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Throughout the vast and complex system we call Masonry are found many beautiful and educational degrees, and although many similarities exist between some of them, on the whole innumerable moral and religious lessons are taught. The following comments, remarks and opinions should in no way be construed to reflect a preference of any Masonic Body over another, but rather to examine some of the fascinating aspects of that part of Freemasonry known to us as the Holy Royal Arch.

The present day Royal Arch Chapter is to me one of the most enjoyable of all the Masonic Degree Conferring Bodies. The companionship between the members seems to be more intense and sincere than in most organizations, and the friendships that develop to be more enduring. The business meetings, or stated convocations, are much less formal and stodgy than those of many bodies, and humor and levity within bounds of decorum and good taste is commonplace. When an officer in a Craft lodge makes a mistake in his ritual he is frequently mortified, whereas in a Royal Arch Chapter he will laugh it off and plow on. Humor has a recognized and deserved place in nearly every situation, Masonry being not the least of them, and our Chapters seem to have accepted and encouraged this human need albeit perhaps unwittingly. Degree work is by necessity more formal, but certainly never stuffy or pompous. Rather than frightening our candidates with mysterious dark secrets of their fate, they are made to feel a part of the proceedings, especially when the degrees are explained to them that they can better absorb the beauties and meanings of the workings.

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How many times have we all heard it said, in one way or another, "All the Masonry that there is, is contained in the Symbolic, Craft or 'Blue' Lodge?" How sad to be so shortsighted! Royal Arch Masonry actually is part of Ancient Craft Masonry, and without the degrees of the Chapter and including the Council Degrees, the Master Mason is incomplete indeed. All of my references to the Royal Arch Chapter are made with the understanding that it be Virginia style whereby the Council degrees are an integral part of the Chapter.

Symbolic Masonry treats of the loss of the Word, leaving the Master Mason dangling with an incomplete story. Royal Arch Masonry teaches the discovery and preservation of that Word, thereby completing the story and truly fulfilling the Master Mason degree.

The Royal Arch was at one time part of the Master Masons Lodge, but was considered of too much importance to be conferred on any but actual Past Masters. The English Grand Lodge of 1751, best known to us as the "Antients" Grand Lodge, claimed to adhere to the "Old Constitutions" of Masonry. A quotation from the Ahiman Rezon, or Book of the Constitutions, best explains their views of the importance of the Royal Arch:

Ancient Masonry consists of four degrees, the first three of which are that of the Apprentice, the Fellowcraft, and the Sublime Degree of Master, and a brother being well versed in these degrees, and having discharged the offices of the Lodge, particularly that of the Master, and fulfilled the duties thereof with the approbation of the brethren of his Lodge, is eligible, if found worthy, to be admitted to the fourth degree, the Holy Royal Arch.

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When the two Grand Lodges, the Antients and the Moderns, merged in 1813 to form the United Grand Lodge of England, the following proclamation was issued:

That pure Ancient Masonry consists of three degrees, and no more: viz. those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellowcraft, and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Royal Arch.

The point here being that the Royal Arch is part and parcel of the Master Mason Degree, and cannot be separated therefrom. It is not clear how or when seaport Chapters were formed, but it is believed that the formation of seaport bodies for the conferral of the Capitular and Cryptic degrees was of no recent date, and done for convenience.

It is interesting that the Royal Arch Degree, which as we learned earlier was conferred only on Past Masters, was considered of such importance that the concession was made that it could be conferred on those brethren who first received the Past Masters Degree, thereby making them "Virtual" Past Masters, as opposed to actual Past Masters.

The present Virginia system of Royal Arch Degrees includes the Mark Master, Past Master, Select Master, Royal Master, Most Excellent Master and Royal Arch Mason. The Select and Royal Master degrees are conferred in a separate body called "the Council," as is a more recent but very beautiful and well written degree called "The Super Excellent Master," which sorrowfully is not a part of Virginia ritual.

The Mark Master degree extends the lessons of the Fellowcraft, teaching order, regularity and discipline. Our thoughts and work should be honorable and good, so that the Great Overseer will approve our labors.

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The degree of Past Master is honorary, but is required of a brother before he can serve his lodge as a Warden. This degree deals with the peculiar circumstances in presiding over a Symbolic Lodge, and teaches humility and service. This is the only degree in the possession of both the Grand Lodge and the Grand Chapter, and can be conferred by a Provisional Lodge of Past Masters, which is a specially convened lodge of Actual and Virtual Past Masters, under the authority of the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

The Select Master Degree deals with a secret vault beneath the Temple, and the deposit of treasure therein by Hiram Abif. The companion degree of Royal Master is based on that period of the Temple after Hiram Abif's [mythical] death.

The Most Excellent Master is a more recent degree dealing with the dedication of the Temple by King Solomon, and the formation of a select group of Masons to maintain the magnificent structure. This degree is purely American and is found nowhere outside of this country.

The Sublime Degree of Royal Arch Mason imparts a number of lessons, but most important teaches the rediscovery of the lost word, symbolizing the discovery and meaning of life, obtained through much effort and trials. From the Freemason's Monitor of 1864 we read:

This degree is indescribably more august, sublime and important than all which precede it, and is the summit and perfection of ancient Masonry. It impresses on our minds a belief of the being and existence of a Supreme Deity, without beginning of days or end of years, and reminds us of the reverence due to His Holy Name. It also brings to light many essentials of the Craft, which were, for the space of four hundred and seventy years, buried in darkness, and without a knowledge of which the Masonic character cannot be complete.

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The degree of Super Excellent Master, I repeat, is honorary and is not part of Virginia Royal Arch Masonry. It is, where conferred, an optional degree under the jurisdiction of Cryptic Councils. It treats and expounds on the capture of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar, and the Babylonian imprisonment of Sedekiah, the last King of Judah, and most impressively teaches fidelity. I strongly recommend that all Royal Arch Masons receive this unusually beautiful degree by taking advantage of the few times it is conferred in Virginia by another jurisdiction, or by going to a nearby state such as North Carolina when it is worked.

After being elected and installed High Priest of a Royal Arch Chapter, the Excellent Companion is then eligible to receive the Degree of Anointed High Priest, and indeed isn't officially considered a Past High Priest until he has received this important degree which deals with the duties of that office. This degree is conferred only once a year, during the Annual Convocation of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Virginia, by the Grand Council of Anointed High Priests of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

After a High Priest has faithfully served his Chapter for a year, and has been Anointed, Consecrated and Set Apart to the Holy Order of High Priesthood, he is then eligible to receive the Thrice Illustrious Masters Degree, conferred immediately following the Anointed High Priests Degree each year. Eligibility is based on his having presided over the Cryptic Council simultaneously with the Royal Arch Chapter, and the degree is under the authority of the Grand Council of Thrice Illustrious Masters of Virginia. This degree is unusually beautiful and moving, especially due to the performance of Most Excellent C. Frank Goodrich, Jr., who portrays the chief character.

The exact history of the Royal Arch is, like most of Masonry, uncertain, but it is felt that it existed as an elevated degree at the time the Masters grade appeared during the early

Sixteenth [sic] Century. During this period Special Masters Lodges were developed for Masters and Past Masters only, and the Hiram legend was introduced into the Master Mason Degree ritual. Since there is no connection between the Royal Arch and the Hiram legend, the Royal Arch must have assumed that which was displaced from the old rituals of the Master Masons Lodge by the introduction of the Hiram legend. Just what was replaced by the Royal Arch is lost to us, but we know that symbols shown on ancient floor cloths and tracing boards disappeared from the regalia and paraphernalia of the Craft Lodge, only to reappear in conjunction with the Royal Arch degree. It would appear then that the Royal Arch received the lost word from the Craft lodge which was displaced by the Hiram legend. The Royal Arch ritual was probably never part of the Master Masons degree, but was most likely a higher degree reserved for Masters and deserving Master Masons.

The importance of the Royal Arch was made very clear by the Articles of Union produced by the formation of the Mother Grand Lodge of England from the "Moderns" and "Antients" from which I have previously quoted. From this definition of Masonry every lodge in the world holden under the Mother Grand Lodge of England promptly claimed the Royal Arch. English Masons, and to a slightly lesser extent, American Masons, are even today required to be Royal Arch Masons as a prerequisite to many other degrees, orders, and bodies. Even the Scottish Rite has required the completion of the Royal Arch prior to its degrees in England.

The first recorded mention of the Royal Arch dates from 1743 in Ireland, telling of a Masonic procession where the Master was preceded by the Royal Arch carried by two Excellent Masters. The earliest record of the Royal Arch in America thus far known is in the minutes of the Time Immemorial Lodge at Fredericksburg, Virginia, dated December 22, 1753.

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Many Royal Arch Chapters were formed either independently or under the authority of the many provincial Grand Lodges operating at that time. Three Virginia Chapters formed the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Virginia in 1808, but as might be expected, it was some years before all Chapters in Virginia joined the Grand Chapter.

Of passing interest but not a point of elaboration at this time is the interesting fact that Virginia has never belonged to the General Grand Chapter, and was until recently one of only two Grand Chapters that were sovereign.

Symbolism of the Royal Arch is so complex that entire research papers have been devoted to only one item. An outstanding one comes to mind on the emblem of the Royal Arch Degree, The Triple Tau, by J. Linwood Holloway, Sr., a Past Master of this Lodge. Another was by another member of this Lodge, Birley Schoen, on the Shekinah, or divine luminous cloud as explained in the Royal Masters Degree.

The Keystone is the emblem of the Mark Master, one of the oldest degree conferred and one of the most interpreted emblems. The Keystone and the Triple Tau especially have caused much speculation on the Royal Arch connection to astrology, occult symbology and cryptography.

There are so many varied facets of Royal Arch Masonry to be studied that a lifetime could be spent without exhausting its potential, but for my money the Chapter is just about the most fascinating part of Masonry in which to be involved -- never boring, always stimulating. Far from being repetitious there seems to be a new lesson to be learned, a new angle, a different perception, a fresh conception each time a degree is conferred.

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The Chapter proclaims a search and study of the lost word, which represents truth. Truth is the purest form of religion, and represents the meaning of life which we all strive to understand. Masonry teaches us to prepare for our other life, and Royal Arch Masonry comes closer to logically demonstrating the truth of life. According to our beloved friend Most Excellent Joseph B. Barnes, when a director of one of the largest observatories passed away some years ago, his wife wrote a short poem to his memory. This man's many years of astronomical studies had developed his profound belief in a life hereafter. This is what she wrote:

Don't call me back when I have gone,  
to cross that unknown sea.  
My work on earth at last is done,  
and I am now set free.

Don't call me back, and do not cry,  
I am so glad to go.  
I oft have longed to soar the sky,  
and other worlds to know.

Don't call me back, a little while,  
and I am far from earth.  
And I am leaving with a smile,  
to face another birth.