

Rights of Visitation

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What is a Lodge? In the Entered Apprentice lecture, we learn that a Lodge is a certain number of Free and Accepted Masons, with a Charter or Warrant from some Grand Lodge, empowering them to work. These are known as Blue Lodges, Subordinate Lodges, or Craft Lodges. Why is it called a Blue Lodge? That is a question for another day. So what is a Grand Lodge? A Grand Lodge is a body that has authority over a given area, such as a state or country. When a Grand Lodge has been established, all Masonic Lodges within its jurisdiction must now belong to that Grand Lodge. The Ancient Landmarks state that a Grand Lodge will have a Grand Master, who has total authority over all the Masons within that Grand Lodge. In the same manner, the Worshipful Master has total authority over all Masons within his Lodge. Where the authority of the two overlaps, the Grand Master is senior to the Worshipful Master. Each Lodge operates independently, but must comply with the rules and regulations established by the Grand Lodge, and the edicts issued by the current Grand Master.

What was the first Grand Lodge? On June 24th, 1717 four London Lodges, which had existed for some time, came together at the Goose and Gridiron Tavern in St. Paul's Churchyard, declared themselves a Grand Lodge and elected Anthony Sayer as their Grand Master. This was the first Grand Lodge in the world. In 1725 the Grand Lodge of Ireland was formed, and other jurisdictions followed suit. James Anderson's 1738 edition of *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* recognized the independence of "the Old Lodge of York City and the Lodges of Scotland, Ireland, France, Italy, etc." These Grand Lodges deserve a more thorough discussion. To summarize, within each country, the Lodges

came together, forming a Grand Lodge. In England, there was a split between the Moderns, who started the first Grand Lodge, and the Antients, who resisted the idea but then formed a Grand Lodge of their own. These two eventually came together to form the United Grand Lodge of England. The general idea was that there would be one Grand Lodge for each country. But in Europe, that was the exception, not the rule, and many European nations have multiple, competing Grand Lodges that operate alongside each other. France is an extreme example, with nearly two dozen Grand Lodges in operation today.

In Virginia as in all of the colonies, Masons moved here from Europe and wanted to form Lodges and enjoy Masonry here in the New World. Thus, a number of Lodges were founded under charters from the Grand Lodges of Scotland, England, and Ireland. Some Lodges, including Fredericksburg, actually predate the forming of the first Grand Lodge. During the Revolutionary War, we broke off all ties with our mother Grand Lodges. Our Grand Lodge was formally constituted on October 30, 1778 in Williamsburg, Virginia by the union of nine Lodges: Norfolk, Port Royal, Blandford, Fredericksburg, Saint Tammany, Williamsburg, Botetourt, Cabin Point, and Yorktown. John Blair, Jr., Past Master of Williamsburg Lodge, was unanimously elected our first Grand Master. George Washington had been invited to be Grand Master but was unable to accept due to his military duties. As he had never been installed Master or Warden of a Lodge he did not consider it Masonically legal. Our Grand Lodge relocated to Richmond, Virginia in 1784. During the same period, every British colony formed a Grand Lodge, and from that point forward, only American Lodges would be chartered in the new world.

So why do we have Grand Lodges for each state? Our ancestors were Virginians long before they were Americans. We were still a colony when the Grand Lodge was founded. It only made sense to have a Grand Lodge just for Virginia. Even after the Constitution was ratified, they were Virginians first, Americans second. This notion of state identity

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has sadly faded over time. Logistically, it would be unworkable to have a Grand Lodge for the entire East Coast. Even today, it would be impossible for one Grand Master to visit every district in multiple states, much less manage them.

Interestingly, there was a "Grand Master of and for America". The Duke of Beaufort, Grand Master of England, issued a patent to Joseph Montfort of Halifax, NC on January 14th, 1771. During his tenure, he chartered at least two lodges, include Cabin Point Royal Arch Lodge No. 7 in Surry County, Virginia. Montfort died in 1776, and the notion of a Grand Lodge of and for America died with him.

Now that we have established what a Lodge and Grand Lodge are, what are your rights as a Mason? As an Entered Apprentice, you may attend EA degrees. As a Fellowcraft, you may attend EA or Fellowcraft degrees. We encourage this, as it helps you learn your catechism by seeing the degrees more than once. But if it is at another Lodge, you must have a Master Mason accompany you. Once you are raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason, you may attend all meetings, or communications, of your lodge. You may also visit any subordinate Lodge holden to the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Any Brother will be able to tell you where other lodges meet. There are several places online listing all of the Virginia Lodges as well. So, what must you do when visiting another Lodge for the first time? You must either be vouched for, or examined, in order to visit. Any Mason who has sat in lodge with you, and has previously attended that lodge, can vouch for you. Thus, it is better to bring someone with you when you visit. If you are alone, determine if any Brother present has sat with you in Lodge. What if no one can vouch for you? Then you will be examined by a committee of three Past Masters who will test your Masonic proficiency, and take the Tilers Oath. The oath simply states that you are an active Mason and know of no reason why you should be suspended or expelled. Always bring your dues card to prove you are a member of this Lodge and are current with your dues. You

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also have the right to ask to see the Lodge's charter, to prove they are a regular Lodge under the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

What about visiting Lodges in other jurisdictions? In order to visit another lodge, say in North Carolina, both their Grand Lodge and our Grand Lodge must have established mutual recognition. This means that both our Grand Lodges are legitimate and regular, we both observe the Ancient Landmarks, and both can trace their origins back to one of the original Grand Lodges in England, Ireland, or Scotland. The Grand Lodge Committee on Foreign Correspondence is responsible for overseeing our Grand Representatives to all recognized Grand Lodges, as well as fielding requests from other Grand Lodges seeking recognition. The committee reviews these requests and if found worthy, they are voted on at the next Grand Annual Communication. All 51 U.S. Grand Lodges, including the District of Columbia, recognize each other. In addition, we are all recognized by the United Grand Lodge of England. Beyond that, concerning other Grand Lodges in the world, each Grand Lodge varies in whom they recognize. If you are planning to travel to another state or country, you would consult the Blue Book. It lists all recognized Grand Lodges, and individual Lodges by city. The Blue Book is published by our Grand Lodge, and each Lodge maintains a copy. So when visiting a Lodge in another jurisdiction, the same rules apply: You must either have someone vouch for you, or be examined. Remember that some jurisdictions vary in their due guards and signs. If they are not familiar with Virginia ritual, it may be harder to prove yourself.

We know from our obligation that we are not allowed to meet with clandestine Masons. But what is clandestine? Any Lodge whose Grand Lodge is not recognized by the Grand Lodge of Virginia is clandestine to us. This says nothing about another Grand Lodge's regularity, or legitimacy. It only means that they have not yet requested, and we have not yet agreed, to recognize each other.

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So what of Prince Hall? Most of you know that we have a corresponding organization of Grand Lodges in America made up predominately of black Masons known as Prince Hall. They have 41 Grand Lodges in America, all of them regular Grand Lodges, recognized by the United Grand Lodge of England. The split between us and Prince Hall dates back to colonial days, and is a topic for another day. But it means there exists in most states an overlapping Grand Lodge with the same jurisdiction as our Grand Lodge. In the last 20 years we have made great strides in healing the divide between us and Prince Hall. The Grand Lodge of Virginia recognizes the Most Worshipful Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Virginia, so we are allowed to attend their Lodges if we wish. Other Grand Lodges have followed suit, all but four of our state Grand Lodges recognize their corresponding Prince Hall Grand Lodge. But, if Virginia does not yet recognize, for example, the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of North Carolina; we would not be allowed to attend their meetings, even though they and the Grand Lodge of North Carolina recognize each other, and we recognize the Grand Lodge of North Carolina. The recognition is not transferable.

This effort is ongoing. Within recent years, the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Alaska applied to us for recognition and was accepted. The Grand Lodge of New York recognizes sixteen Prince Hall Grand Lodges. The general rule is that a state Grand Lodge will consider a request for recognition from a Prince Hall Grand Lodge only if they are already recognized by their counterpart in their own state. One day, we may all recognize each other; and at some point, we may even begin to consider merging our overlapping Grand Lodges. But that day is not today.

So, now that we have explained clandestine, what is bogus? You could say that a bogus Lodge, and this is an unofficial term, is a Lodge that is truly clandestine. It is a Lodge with no claim to legitimacy whatsoever. Typically, a bogus Lodge is one started by an expelled Mason, or a man who was never a Mason at all, who just copied our ritual and symbols, and now swindles innocent men who want to be a Mason and don't know the

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difference. These bogus Lodges usually form their own Grand Lodge with less than a handful of Lodges, and everyone is a 33rd degree as well. These Lodges are an embarrassment to Masonry. Most of them focus on recruiting black and Hispanic men, and I do mean recruiting. A discussion of these Lodges is also a topic for another day. If you have any doubt as to the legitimacy of a Lodge you might visit, or a Mason who you meet, find out the name of their Grand Lodge and look them up in the Blue Book. But remember, when talking to a newly met Brother on the street, the time to verify their Masonic proficiency or legitimacy is when they present themselves at our lodge door as a visitor, not when you are standing in the street. No true Mason will ever demand of you to prove your Grand Lodge membership or demonstrate your Masonic knowledge outside of a lodge room.

A final note, while we are on the subject of visitation. You have the right to refuse to sit in Lodge with anyone who is not a member of your Lodge. You must notify the Worshipful Master, and he must ask him to retire. You are not obligated to give a reason why. But I must caution you: The only valid reason to refuse to sit in Lodge with a brother Master Mason is if he is guilty of some Masonic offense. If that is the case, then it is your obligation to bring charges against him and have him expelled from Masonry. If your reason is not so serious, then it is your obligation to seek out that brother, reconcile your difference, and restore harmony to the Lodge.