

History of Freemasonry

The traditional history of freemasonry appears in Anderson's *Constitutions*, a semi-official book published in 1723, about the time of the first grand lodge. The book traces the science of geometry from Adam who, says Anderson, *must have had the liberal sciences, particularly geometry, written on his heart*. Why so? Well, no one could have taught Adam because he was the first man. His knowledge of geometry had to be built in, rather like a bird's knowledge of how to build a nest, or a baby's knowledge of how to suckle, or puke all over my trousers.

Anderson says that Adam taught geometry to his sons who in turn taught it to their offspring and so on down to Moses, to whom god gave the design of the tabernacle, the tent made by Aholiab and Bezaleel, in which the presence of god resided. As a result, Moses became the first Grand Master. During the wilderness years, Moses marshalled the Israelites into a regular lodge, though who declared it regular is not known.

Turning away from such myths and legends — fun though they are — there are two more serious theories on the origins of freemasonry: the transition theory and the spy theory.

The transition theory argues that speculative masonry derives from operative masonry. Masons went through a long apprenticeship, and naturally resented unqualified workers, called cowans, trying to take their jobs. In those early days, few could read or write, so certificates were no use, and masons used signs and words, kept secret for obvious reasons, to prove their status. At the end of their apprenticeship, they were considered *free*, a word still found for example in the title *Freeman of the City of London*. It may have meant *free to take on work without supervision* but there are many other ideas about this.

Around 1600, men who were not operative masons began to join. Amateur architecture and mathematics were fashionable, especially around the time of Newton.¹ There is evidence that the proceedings of the lodge involved discussion of mathematical and scientific subjects. From 1620, there is evidence of the 'Acception', a separate part of the London Company of Masons which seems to have been an expensive dining club. Non-masons were *accepted* as members, paying a much higher fee than masons. Here perhaps is a possible derivation of our name: *Free and Accepted Masons*.

Other people disagree with the transitional theory. They see speculative Freemasonry as a quite separate creation, arising probably in the 16th century in reaction to the religious troubles and dangers of the time. Think of Henry VIII, Bloody Mary, Cromwell, the Jacobites and so on. This theory, espoused by John Hamill for example, may have led well-meaning men to seek ways of meeting together, irrespective of creed. The fact that from its very beginning, speculative Freemasonry has been open to men of all religions may be support for this. What is more, we still forbid all religious and political discussion in lodge.

The secrets of Freemasonry, words and signs of recognition — so *this* theory goes, would have been less to protect jobs and more to protect the members from spies. The metaphor of the mason's trade was 'cover', as John Le Carré would have said.

¹ 1643-1727