

Early Annals of Capitular Masonry

The facts concerning the introduction of the Capitular system into this country are a good deal obscure. That the Royal Arch degree has been conferred in the cities on the seaboard for more than a century past there can now be little doubt. Appealing to the fullest information I have been able to discover, I write this historical retrospect.

St. Andrew's Royal Arch Chapter, No. 1, in Boston, can proudly boast a most illustrious history. This Royal Arch Lodge - then so-called - James Brown, Master, met in that city August 28th, 1769. This is also the date of its Charter, but of what authoritative source derived is not stated, though of course the document itself explains. Thomas Waterman, Grand High Priest of Massachusetts, some time since kindly put me in possession of many particulars concerning this interesting old chapter. For a long period degrees were conferred therein extraneous to the Capitular system as we now have it, as will be observed by an extract from the second recorded meeting of "a Royal Arch Lodge," held August 28th, 1769: "The petition of Brother William Dams coming before the lodge, begging to have and receive the parts belonging to a Royal Arch Mason, which being read was received and he unanimously voted in, and was accordingly made by receiving the four steps, that of an Excellent, Super-Excellent, Royal Arch and Knight Templar."

May 14th, 1770, Joseph Warren, who was Grand Master of Masons for the continent of America in the ante-revolutionary period, by a commission dated March 7th, 1772, from the Earl of Dumfries, as Grand Master of Scotland, was made a Royal Arch Mason in St. Andrew's Lodge. This was in the Mason's Hall in the Green Dragon Tavern, on Union Street, although subsequently the chapter met at Mason's Hall, north side of the Market House (Faneuil Hall Market.)

The degree of Mark Master was not connected with the other chapter degrees until November 28th, 1793. For the first time, November 15th, 1797, the designation St. Andrew's Royal Arch Chapter appears on the record. No mention of the degree of Knight Templar is to be found after the meeting of December 3rd, 1794, with these historic antecedents, St. Andrew's has steadily pursued its course, holding a stated convocation once a month, and has now a membership of about 500. Of course, in the long list of distinguished officers in the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Massachusetts, very many have been selected from the Past High Priests of St. Andrew's Chapter, all of whom have been ardent devotees of the Royal Craft.

It will be observed that this renowned chapter was instituted before the Capitular system, as we now have it, was promulgated, and probably in its archives are to be found the edicts announcing the changes which modified the work. To the student of Royal Arch Masonry the annals of this chapter must be a rich mine of instructive and interesting information.

In this connection, I revert to the meager published records of the General Grand Chapter of the United States, and on the first page I discover that on the 24th of October, 1797, several prominent companions met in Boston, and proceeded to organize that august body. St. Andrew's chapter was represented by its leading officers, of whom Benjamin Hurd, Jr., was then High Priest, he having been elected in 1791, and held the office for seven years, and he also having held the office of General Grand King for a long period. When delegates from St. Andrew's Chapter and King Cyrus Chapter, at Newburyport, met at the Green Dragon Tavern Tuesday, March 13th, 1798, and organized the Grand Royal Chapter of Massachusetts, Companion Hurd was elected the first Grand High Priest, and was re-elected for three successive years.

These statements show that the General Grand Chapter had a prior origin to the Grand Chapter of Massachusetts, but of only a few months. The old commonwealth has always been loyal to the General Grand Body that her devoted Masons assisted in organizing, and a roll of the officers will reveal that several times her Grand Chapter has furnished efficient and faithful servants, among whom was John McClellan, of Boston, who was General Grand Treasurer from 1865 till his death, September 29th, 1878, and had been a member of St. Andrew's Chapter from November, 1844.

It is doubtless justly claimed that records exist which prove beyond question that Chapter No. 3, (now Jerusalem Chapter No. 3), of Philadelphia, is the oldest Royal Arch Chapter in the United States, and that the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Pennsylvania, was the first Grand Chapter organized in this country. The minutes of Royal Arch Lodge, No. 3, as originally designated, are complete from December 3d, 1767, to the present date, and naturally enough are regarded as a sacred treasure. This, it will be observed, is a date anterior to the organization of St. Andrew's Chapter Boston, but how much earlier Royal Arch Masonry was introduced into Philadelphia will probably never be known, because the destruction of the Masonic hall by fire, in the year 1819, caused great loss to the Masons of Pennsylvania, in the burning of nearly all their old records.

From this Jerusalem Chapter has grown the fourteen chapters now in Philadelphia and immediate vicinity, and the 102 chapters in the State, with an aggregate membership of about 11,000. All the chapters in Philadelphia are numerically large bodies, and the mother chapter reports a roll of 400 companions. In addition there are three Mark Master Mason's lodges in that city, which have a membership of 2,000.

The annals of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania show that on November 23rd, 1795, the Grand Chapter was opened under the immediate sanction the Grand Lodge. The Grand Chapter met under the same auspices until January 5th, 1824, at which time it became independent, and it is worthy of note that it has never allied itself to the General Grand Chapter of the United States, which even then was a powerful body embracing sixteen Grand Chapters.

Of the early chapters working anterior to the organization of the Grand Chapter of Connecticut there were six, all represented in the convention at Hartford, May 17th, 1798, the real date of the formation of that Grand Body with elected officers. These six were as follows: Hiram Chapter, No. 1, located at Newtown; Franklin Chapter, No. 2, located at New Haven; Washington Chapter, No. 3, located at Middletown; Franklin Chapter, No. 4, located at Norwich; Solomon Chapter, No. 5, located at Derby; Vanden Broeck Chapter, No. 5, located at Colchester.

Authority for these chapters came from New York. Representatives of these bodies met in Hartford, July 5th, 1796, "to take into consideration matters relative to said chapters which may be deemed of expedience or utility," hence that date is usually given as the date of the organization of the Grand Chapter of Connecticut. A like convention was held October 20th, 1796, at New Haven, but no further organization effected. Stephen T. Hosmer was the first Grand High Priest.

Joseph K. Wheeler, Grand Secretary of Connecticut, is quite positive that in Hiram Chapter as early as 1791, the degrees of Mark Master, Master in the Chair, and Most Excellent Master, were conferred. The bylaws of that old chapter show "the regular times of meeting" to have been bi-monthly. In the year 1840, Hiram Chapter became delinquent, and has since been dropped from the roll of the Grand Chapter.

The name of Franklin designates two chapters. It was a, common thing in the early days, for Masons in that jurisdiction to duplicate names of lodges also.

As a matter of interest to all Royal Arch Masons I give the following dates of formation of several of the oldest subordinates and Grand Chapters: Jerusalem Chapter, No. 3, Philadelphia, anterior to 1758; St. Andrew's Chapter, Boston, August 28th, 1769; Providence Chapter, No. 1, Providence, September 3rd, 1793; Hiram Chapter, No. 1, Newtown, Conn., April 6th, 1791; King Cyrus Chapter, Newbury port, Mass., July 9th, 1790; Grand Chapter of Pennsylvania, November 23d, 1795; Grand Chapter of Connecticut, May 17th, 1798; Grand Chapter of Rhode Island, March 13th, 1797; Grand Chapter of Massachusetts, Oct. 24th, 1797; Grand Chapter of New York, March 24th, 1798; General Grand Chapter of the United States, January 24th, 1798.

To those familiar with the history of Capitular Masonry in the State of New York, the omission of Ancient Chapter No. 1, in New York city, will appear singular. The reason will be made obvious. The date of the origin of the old lodge first working the Royal Arch degree in the metropolitan city cannot now be ascertained, but it was most certainly the organization that subsequently became known as Ancient Chapter, which was enrolled under the Grand Royal Arch Chapter, August 28th, 1806. The history prior to 1798 is so mixed with tradition that scarcely anything more can now be determined; save that as early as 1763 the warrant for the original organization to confer the degrees up to Royal Arch came from England.

Providence Chapter No. 1, Providence, Rhode Island, has always held exclusive jurisdiction in that city, and with its seven hundred members is to-day the largest Chapter in the United States, numerically more important than several Grand Jurisdictions which boast their dozen Grand Officers and a representation in the General Grand Chapter equal with the great States of New York, Illinois or Massachusetts.

Submitted by Ex. Comp. Adam Meldrum
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Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of Alberta

Voice of Masonry, Thomas Gliddon 1880