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Definition: **Freemasonry** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

1 the institutions, rites, practices, etc, of Freemasons

2 Freemasons collectively



Summary Article: **Freemasonry**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

Image from: [American Eagle Wall Plaque; John Haley Bellamy;... in The Encyclopedia of American Folk Art](#)

teachings and practices of the secret fraternal order officially known as the Free and Accepted Masons, or Ancient Free and Accepted Masons.

Organizational Structure

There are approximately 5 million members worldwide, mostly in the United States and other English-speaking countries. With adherents in almost every nation where Freemasonry is not officially banned, it forms the largest secret

society in the world. There is no central Masonic authority; jurisdiction is divided among autonomous national authorities, called grand lodges, and many concordant organizations of higher-degree Masons. In the United States and Canada the highest authority rests with state and provincial grand lodges. Custom is the supreme authority of the order, and there are elaborate symbolic rites and ceremonies, most of which utilize the instruments of the stonemason—the plumb, the square, the level, and compasses—and apocryphal events concerning the building of King Solomon's Temple for allegorical purposes.

The principles of Freemasonry have traditionally been liberal and democratic. *Anderson's Constitutions* (1723), the bylaws of the Grand Lodge of England, which is Freemasonry's oldest extant lodge, cites religious toleration, loyalty to local government, and political compromise as basic to the Masonic ideal. Masons are expected to believe in a Supreme Being, use a holy book appropriate to the religion of the lodge's members, and maintain a vow of secrecy concerning the order's ceremonies.

The basic unit of Freemasonry is the local Blue lodge, generally housed in a Masonic temple. The lodge consists of three Craft, Symbolic, or Blue Degrees: Entered Apprentice (First Degree), Fellow Craft (Second Degree), and Master Mason (Third Degree). These gradations are meant to correspond to the three levels—apprentice, journeyman, and master—of the medieval stonemasons' guilds. The average Mason does not rise above Master Mason.

If he does, however, he has the choice of advancing through about 100 different rites, encompassing some 1,000 higher degrees, throughout the world. In the United States, the two most popular rites are the Scottish and the York. The Scottish Rite awards 30 higher degrees, from Secret Master (Fourth Degree) to Sovereign Grand Inspector General (Thirty-third Degree). The York Rite awards ten degrees, from Mark Master to Order of Knights Templar, the latter being similar to a Thirty-third Degree Scottish Rite Mason.

Other important Masonic groups are the Prince Hall Grand Lodge, to which many African-American

Masons belong; the Veiled Prophets of the Enchanted Realm (the “fraternal fun order for Blue Lodge Masons”); and the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (Thirty-second degree Masons who, as the Shriners, are noted for their colorful parades and support of children's hospitals; they were established as a Masonic social organization in 1872). There are also many subsidiary Masonic groups, including the Order of the Eastern Star, limited to Master Masons and their female relatives; De Molay, an organization for boys; and Job's Daughters and Rainbow, two organizations for girls. Many of the orders maintain homes for aged members.

Development of the Order

The order is thought to have arisen from the English and Scottish fraternities of practicing stonemasons and cathedral builders in the early Middle Ages; traces of the society have been found as early as the 14th cent. Because, however, some documents of the order trace the sciences of masonry and geometry from Egypt, Babylon, and Palestine to England and France, some historians of Masonry claim that the order has roots in antiquity.

The formation of the English Grand Lodge in London (1717) was the beginning of the widespread dissemination of speculative Freemasonry, the present-day fraternal order, whose membership is not limited to working stonemasons. The six lodges in England in 1700 grew to about 30 by 1723. There was a parallel development in Scotland and Ireland, although some lodges remained unaffiliated and open only to practicing masons. By the end of the 18th cent. there were Masonic lodges in all European countries and in many other parts of the world as well.

The first lodge in the United States was founded in Philadelphia (1730); Benjamin Franklin was a member. Many of the leaders of the American Revolution, including John Hancock and Paul Revere, were members of St. Andrew's Lodge in Boston. George Washington became a Mason in 1752. At the time of the Revolution most of the American lodges broke away from their English and Scottish antecedents. Freemasonry has continued to be important in politics; 13 Presidents have been Masons, and at any given time quite a large number of the members of Congress have belonged to Masonic lodges. Notable European Masons included Voltaire, Giuseppe Mazzini, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Franz Joseph Haydn, Johann von Goethe, Johann von Schiller, and many leaders of Russia's Decembrist revolt (1825).

Opposition to Freemasonry

Because of its identification with 19th-century bourgeois liberalism, there has been much opposition to Freemasonry. The most violent in the United States was that of the Anti-Masonic party. Freemasonry's anticlerical attitude has also led to strong opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, which first expressed its anti-Masonic attitude in a bull of Pope Clement XII (1738). The Catholic Church still discourages its members from joining the order. Totalitarian states have always suppressed Freemasonry; the lodges in Italy, Austria, and Germany were forcibly eradicated under fascism and Nazism, and there are now no lodges in China.

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