

WOMEN AND MASONRY



At no time in recorded history have women been permitted to join a regular Masonic lodge. To find the reason for this we must delve into the traditions of the Middle Ages when the tenets of Masonry were being established. The operative Masons of those times, the craftsmen who built the stately cathedrals, palaces and other public buildings, lived together, worked together and traveled together. This

alone would have been awkward for women, but perhaps the real reason was that women had very few rights in the Middle Ages. This was unfortunate but true.

Most of the rules governing the early Masons have been preserved in the old manuscripts known as the Old Charges or Constitutions. There are about 130 of these in all, the first being written around 1390 A.D. They contain this rule concerning apprentices, "You shall not marry, or contract yourself to any woman during your apprenticeship," and this statement in 1663 concerning accepted members, "The Persons admitted members of a Lodge must be good and true men, free-born, and of mature and discreet ages, no Bondmen, no Women, no immoral or scandalous men, but of good Report."

Apparently, Masons, even our early brethren, have been sympathetic, gallant and gracious. Around 1737, each initiate was given two pairs of white gloves with this message, "Put on these gloves -- their whiteness is a symbol of purity, and of the innocence of a Mason's morals. This other pair is for a Lady's use, you will present it to the one who holds the first place in your heart; we wish by that to prove to the fair sex that we do not lose sight of them even in our Mysteries. If we do not open the doors of this worthy Temple to them, it is because we fear their allurements and the power of their charms."

Apparently, women have always associated with Masonry. Early lodge minutes indicate feasts and other entertainment under Lodge auspices to which wives, daughters and female friends were invited. The City Companies of London, of which the Mason's Company was one, had a Maiden's Chamber which was a powder room, assembly room and dining room exclusively for women.

This is not to say that women have not tried to gain admittance. Around 1725 to 1750, quasi-Masonic activities were in vogue in the capitols of Europe, especially Paris. Boredom in court circles caused ladies to turn their attention to such practices, not only to the Craft itself, but in

frolics and skits including initiation ceremonies. They were often supported their actions by active Masons.

There are instances in which women have been duly initiated either by accident or design. One of the best known was Miss Elizabeth Saint Leger of Cork, Ireland. One evening, around 1710, she hid herself in a room adjoining the Lodge, removed a brick from wall of the lodge-room and witnessed an initiation. In leaving, she inadvertently ran into the Tyler who escorted her into the lodge room. The brethren decided to obligate her, and one story has it that she ultimately became Master of the Lodge. She was often seen wearing full Masonic regalia, and when she died in 1775, she was accorded the honor of a Masonic burial.



In the United States, several women have been obligated not to reveal what they overheard, and there have always been men who favored Female Masonry. Opportunities for co-habitation have always existed and still do. These have been called Co-Masonry, Adoptive Masonry, Androgynous Masonry, and that recognized today as an appendant Masonic body, the Order of Eastern Star. Adoptive Masonry got its name from a requirement that each female society had to be adopted by and placed under the guardianship of a regular Masonic lodge. Androgenous refers to degrees which can be conferred on both males and females.

One especially interesting chapter of Adoptive Masonry arose in Paris in 1743 and was called The Order of Happy Folks. It had a nautical bearing with all the Sisters making a symbolic voyage from the isle of Felicity in ships navigated by the brethren. There were four degrees: Cabin-boy, Captain, Commodore, and Vice-Admiral. Two others were called Knights and Ladies of the Anchor and the order of Wood-Cutters. Adoptive Masonry was officially sanctioned by the Grand Orient of France on 10 June 1774, which recognized four degrees: Female Apprentice, Craftswoman, Mistress, and Perfect Masoness. In 1917 a fifth degree was added: Female-elect Sublime Scottish Dame. These flourished in France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Poland and Russia. Being always conservative, England refused to recognize them.

The Rite of Adoption never made it to America, but in 1850, a man named Rob Morris introduced a form of it here, which he called the American Adoptive Rite. Albert Pike took great interest in this movement, saying "Our mothers, sisters, wives and daughters cannot, it is true, be admitted to share with us the grand mysteries of Freemasonry, but there is no reason why there should not be also a Masonry for them ... by means of which ... they may co-operate in the great labors of Masonry by assisting in, and in some respects directing their charities and toiling in the cause of human progress."



Of course, we don't call the society formed by Rob Morris the American Adoptive Rite anymore. We call it the Order of Eastern Star. Morris, an ardent minister and Mason, saw the need for an order in which Masons and their families could meet and enjoy fraternalism. He invented it, wrote the degrees for it and published its Rosary. This beautiful organization, now almost 150

years old, is one of the largest fraternal orders in the world to which both men and women can belong. And, when you put it alongside the world's largest fraternal organization for men, it makes you feel real proud to be associated.

I wouldn't want you to go away thinking that men haven't found humor in all of this, so I'll read to you the first and last stanzas of a poem that was published, anonymously at course, in 1765:

"It is oft of the females been said
(But you'll own the report is not true)
That they are not Freemasons made
For they cannot their passions subdue,
That they never can subject their will,
Nor be bound any secrets to keep,
Nor never can keep their tongues still,
Except when in bed fast asleep.

Then ladies attend to advice,
And listen to what I impart,
In virtue and honor be nice,
Learn to govern the tongue and the heart;
In short, you must copy the fair,
Whom I have just mentioned before,
And then we will try, I declare
To admit you within the Lodge door."