

LYNN DUMENIL

Freemasonry and American Culture, 1880-1930



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**FREEMASONRY
AND AMERICAN CULTURE**



Officers of Live Oak Lodge

Freemasonry
and American Culture
1880–1930

LYNN DUMENIL

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For my mother,
Margaret Dumenil

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Illustrations

Frontispiece. Officers of Live Oak Lodge, Oakland, California, 1894 (reprinted from *Souvenir: Fortieth Anniversary Celebration*, p. 64)

(Illustrations appear between pages 112 and 113)

FIG. 1. Officers of Rising Star Lodge No. 83 (reprinted from Sherman, *Fifty Years of Masonry in California*, 1:238)

FIG. 2. Plan of the Order of Masonry (courtesy of the California Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons)

FIG. 3. Drill Corps of Los Angeles Commandery No. 9, Knights Templar (reprinted from Sherman, *Fifty Years of Masonry in California*, 2:683)

FIG. 4. Oakland Masonic Temple, exterior (courtesy of the Bancroft Library)

FIG. 5. Oakland Masonic Temple, interior (reprinted from Sherman, *Fifty Years of Masonry in California*, 1:211)

FIG. 6. Chicago Masonic Temple (reprinted from *Voice of Masonry*, 31:605)

FIG. 7. "Which Are You?" (reprinted from *Saturday Evening Post*, 5 April 1924, p. 174)

Preface

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, organizational activity engulfed America. Charles and Mary Beard called the proliferation of women's clubs, professional societies, civic groups, reform associations, and other organizations a "general mania."¹ A striking and ubiquitous form of organization was the secret fraternal society. Largely neglected by historians, these orders were immensely popular. Over 460 originated between 1880 and 1900, and in 1901, one observer estimated that more than five million Americans were in 600 orders.² Similar in structure and function, fraternal orders served highly diverse groups. There were orders for natives and immigrants, Catholics and Protestants, blacks and whites, men and women, adults and children. The archetypical secret fraternal order, as well as the most popular and prestigious, was the Ancient and Accepted Order of Freemasons.

This study examines Masonry between 1880 and 1930. A white, male, primarily native, Protestant society, Masonry had long existed in America, but saw its greatest growth after the Civil War. Fully recovered from an antebellum crusade against Masonry, the fraternity in 1879 claimed 550,000 members and had dozens of imitators. By 1925, it was over three million strong. Although Masonry by the end of the 1920s was beginning to lose some of its popularity, the history of the organization during the period of its greatest appeal illuminates the significant cultural role of voluntary associations in modern America.³

Fraternal orders, like churches, are "expressive" organizations—they are directed primarily toward meeting the social and personal needs of their members. In contrast, "instrumen-

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tal" organizations, such as trade unions or professional associations, have specific goals to accomplish. They mediate between members and the outside world. Both types flourished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The major impetus for instrumental organizations' rapid expansion may be readily grasped. In an increasingly complex and economically rationalized society, individuals sought political and economic power in organizational activity. Expressive organizations, however, generally did not pursue such tangible ends, and the reason for their proliferation is less clear. Examining the sources of Masonry's popularity and analyzing the functions it served provides insight into the more elusive aspects of such voluntary associations, particularly the way in which they created a sense of community based on the shared values and interests of their members.⁴

A desire to understand the appeal and function of fraternal orders furnished the initial impetus for this study. But as the research unfolded and the richness of the material became evident, my focus shifted to a much broader set of problems, centering on the way in which Masonry mirrored middle-class culture. In the late nineteenth century, the order was a quasi-religious secret society dedicated to the ideals of fraternity, charity, and moral behavior. It offered sociability, relief in times of distress, as well as possible financial and political advantages, but the most important aspect of Masonry was its commitment to moral uplift and self-improvement. Inculcating the traditional virtues of sobriety, thrift, temperance, piety, industry, self-restraint, and moral obligation, Masonry offered its members identification with the values honored in the middle-class world of late nineteenth-century America.

Another crucial aspect of late nineteenth-century Masonry was its religious character. One of the order's major activities was the performance of various esoteric rituals. Heavily infused with religious symbolism and allegories, the rituals emphasized man's relationship to God, the inevitability of death, and the hope for immortality. Masonic literature, in which authors debated the nature of Masonry's religious content,

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further underlines the sacred quality of the order and also illuminates the controversies over faith that characterized late nineteenth-century America.

Although Masonry mirrored the religious and moralistic content of American society's concerns and values, Masons took pains to distinguish between the internal sacred world of Masonry and the external world of the "profanes." In particular, they contrasted the stability and harmony of their fraternity with the disharmony and disorder of American society. Masonry, they argued, had separate standards and concerns from the immoral, competitive, and commercial world beyond the temple and provided a sacred asylum in which men could ignore the social, political, economic, and religious conflicts of their time while cultivating love of God, bonds of fellowship, and improvement of the individual.

Although the characteristics of Masonry described above existed in the twentieth century, by the 1920s, the order had undergone significant changes. Exceptional growth altered the character of the membership, swelled the size of lodges, and created serious problems for leaders faced with assimilating the mass of new Masons. In particular, Masonic officials felt that the rapid influx of members and the tendency to larger lodges undermined the order's ability to offer its members the fraternity and sense of community its ideals promised. Even more significant than the expansion of Masonry was the widespread movement to de-emphasize the ritualistic, religious, and moralistic aspects of the order to create a more secular organization. This nationwide trend, evident in the actions of leaders as well as the rank-and-file membership, resulted in changes in Masonic ideology, structure, and activities.

Attempts to adapt the fraternity to changing conditions in the external world, these changes illuminate the secularizing and modernizing trends in American society. For example, in the 1920s, Masonic social activities took precedence over ritualism, revealing a preoccupation with the consumption and leisure-time pursuits made possible by advanced industrialization and general middle-class prosperity. Similarly, the

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movement to modify the goals and ideology of Masonry reflects an encroaching secular spirit. Feeling that newer and younger members were dissatisfied with Masonry because it was too old-fashioned, many leaders made conscious efforts to update Masonry. Minimizing the order's religion and ritualism, they sought to provide it with "modern" goals, such as community service and the practical application of Masonic ideals.

The changes in Masonry also illuminate American ethnic and cultural conflicts in the 1920s. The desire to promote 100 percent Americanism, an outgrowth of the postwar Red Scare, led Masons to a militant expression of their own cultural identity, as well as to a demand that Masonry as an institution take a stand in the efforts to meet the problems posed by radicalism, unassimilated immigrants, and "political" Catholicism. Taken together, the demands for a modern Masonry and the concern to reinforce native, old-stock American ideals prompted Masons to depart from the traditional emphasis on individual morality pursued in a sacred environment in favor of becoming more involved in the profane and secular world.

The attempt to modernize Masonry was widespread, but it was not prosecuted consistently enough to insure the order's vitality. The weight of Masonic tradition and conflict within the organization over de-emphasizing ritual and religion hindered the process of secularization. This inability to jettison its religious component left the order unacceptably out of step in an increasingly secular world and led to a decline in popularity and prestige from which it never completely recovered. Limited in their success, the significance of the attempts to modify Masonry lies in the way in which they illuminate the transformations of middle-class values concerning work, leisure, success, morality, and religion, and facilitate analysis of the social and cultural changes accompanying America's industrialization, urbanization, and modernization.

Although Masonry is a secret society, a wealth of material about the organization is available. I have used dozens of magazines and local lodge bulletins from all over the country. In addition, *Journals of Proceedings* from the various state Grand