

# **American Masonic Roots in British Military Lodges**

**James R. Case**

Master, American Lodge of Research, New York City

It is not at all unusual in the States to hear expressions from a Freemason which indicate that the speaker seems to have an idea that the progression of degrees known there as the "York Rite" originated in its present form with the Mother Grand Lodge of England.

The very term "York Rite" is a misnomer, so much so that many prefer to speak of the "American Rite". We might better say "American System" when we refer to the series of degrees conferred in the lodge, chapter, council and commandery, in which we find carried along the story of the Temple and the mystery of the Word.

The United Grand Lodge of England did not come into being until 1813, almost a century after a Grand Lodge was organized at London and began to assert some control over lodges within the city, in the Provinces and abroad in the world. But it "mothered" little of the Freemasonry brought into the western hemisphere.

Provincial Grand Masters were named for North America, or parts thereof, by the Grand Lodge at London and the Grand Lodge of Scotland. Lodges chartered by the Grand Lodge of Ireland worked in America, and the "Atholl" Grand Lodge or the Ancients issued a warrant under which the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania was organized in 1764, and a Grand Lodge in New York city in 1783. There was no single source of Freemasonry in North America. The short lived Grand Lodge of All England at York did nothing for American Freemasonry except to bequeath the name of York.

My remarks will not deal with the Ineffable degrees of the present Scottish Rite, which came to America from France by way of the West Indies two hundred years ago. Nor will I discuss the Council wherein the degrees of Royal Master, Select Master and Super Excellent Master are conferred, as that grouping is a fabrication of the early 1800s. I will touch upon some of the more significant incidents which occurred during the latter half of the 18th century, the late 1700s. And when I use the words "America" or "Americans" please understand that I am using them in a narrow sense, and as a matter of convenience in referring to the United States along the Atlantic seaboard, or the colonies from which the nation grew. I am not trying to cut off Canada, or the Maritime provinces, or the West Indies, from their attachment to the continent.

I hope to show in the course of my remarks that the lodges held in the British regiments played an important part in spreading interest in the Craft, and particularly in introducing the degrees of Royal Arch Mason and Knight Templar, which are now the principal ornaments in the American system raised on the foundation of the "Blue Lodge" degrees.

No British regular army units were sent to North America until the occupation of Louisbourg in 1746, when the 29th, 30th and 45th regiments came from Gibraltar. There had been several independent or separate companies raised, and the 40th regiment had been established here and stationed in Nova Scotia. There was a lodge at Annapolis Royal for which a dispensation was granted by St. Johns Provincial Grand Lodge at Boston (Modern in origin) in 1738, and also chartered by the Ancient Grand Lodge of Ireland in 1755, as No. 399.

While we know that a Lodge, Number 83 under Irish Constitution, did exist in the 30th regiment at Gibraltar, it cannot be conclusively proven that it worked at Louisbourg between 1746-49, during the occupation. But there were a dozen or more officers from New Hampshire, Massachusetts and Connecticut who came home from a tour of duty in the garrison at Louisbourg and then appear as Maso,@is. Since the records of the lodges then sitting at Boston and Portsmouth, New Hampshire are fairly complete, we assume those Masons who show up after a visit to Cape Breton were made at Louisbourg. This supposition is supported by tradition in some cases, although we all realize that stories lose nothing in the retelling. But it is almost certain that among the charter members of the lodges at New Haven and Middletown, Connecticut, formed in 1750 and 1754 respectively, there were men who were made Masons at Louisbourg, because in tracing their movements they could not have been made anywhere else.

The situation in the garrison at Louisbourg in 1746-49 could not have been much different than it was after the recapture in 1758, when a British officer of the 43rd Foot recorded in his diary - "When the calendar does not furnish us with a loyal excuse for assembling in the evening, we have recourse to a Freemasons Lodge, where we work so hard that it is inconceivable to think what a quantity of business of great importance is transacted in a very short time".

Grand strategy for the campaign of 1755 to be conducted against the French in America, included an expedition into the upper Ohio river valley from a base in Virginia, the prime target being Fort Duquesne, which stood on a spot in the very center of the present day Pittsburgh. General Braddock was in command of this force which included battalions of the 44th and 48th regiments, but the time element and the disaster which befell the army precluded any Masonic activity that year.

For obvious reasons when the army is in the field there is no opportunity for work or festivity by the Craft. When in garrison or winter quarters it is a different matter. Under successive command of Forbes and Bouquet, parts of the regular forces spent the winters in Philadelphia, and there in 1767 we find evidence of the Royal Arch and Knight Templar degrees being worked. They could only have been introduced by lodges under Irish constitution which were with the several regiments quartered in the city. In 1758 the Grand Lodge of Ancients warranted Royal Arch Lodge Number 3 in Philadelphia. It no doubt was formed by men in an army lodge working under Irish warrant, but it was more convenient perhaps to obtain a warrant from

London than from Ireland. However, I do not know of any civilian lodge in America warranted by the Grand Lodge of Ireland,\* except one second hand which I will mention later. In 1767 the Royal Irish regiment was in Philadelphia and had with it Lodge No. 351 I.C. Applicants from among the officers of that regiment were refused consideration by the city lodges for the very reason that the regimental lodge was present and working. Both the Royal Arch degree and the Knight Templar degree, having been introduced by Ancient Masons, appear to have been retained under Grand Lodge control in Pennsylvania and were conferred under sanction of a lodge warrant until well into the 1800s. Apparently the early influence of the Grand Lodge of London was swept away by the introduction of the Ancient system when the "Atholl" Grand Lodge warranted a Grand Lodge in Pennsylvania. In that state today the ritual and practice is quite different from what the other states follow.

There is evidence of a military lodge at Pittsburgh in 1759 which also worked the Royal Arch degree. Farther west at just about this time, Masonry was introduced into the settlements surrounding the forts at Detroit and the straits at Mackinaw. Those developments I will not discuss as they belong in part at least, to the history of Freemasonry in the 60th regiment, one raised in America.

An incident at Albany has often been cited, but is so pertinent it will bear repetition here. The 2nd Battalion Royal had been quartered in the city for some time, and had made Masons from among the townsmen, when a change of station was ordered in 1759. The military brethren then had made an exact copy of their warrant **and** endorsed it as follows -

"We, The Master, Wardens and Brethren of a Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons, No. 74, Registry of Ireland, held in the Second Battalion Royal, adorned with all the honors, and assembled in due form, Do hereby declare certify and attest, that whereas, our body is very numerous by the addition of many new members, merchants and inhabitants of the City of Albany, they having earnestly requested and besought us to enable them to hold a Lodge during our absence from them, and we knowing them to be men of undoubted reputations and skill and ability in Masonry, and desirous to promote the welfare of the Craft. We have, therefore, by unanimous consent and agreement, given them an exact and true copy of our Warrant as above, and have properly installed Mr. Richard Cartwright, Mr. Henry Bostwick and Mr. Wm. Ferguson, as Assistant Master and Wardens of our body, allowing them to sit and act during our absence, or until they, by our assistance, can procure a separate warrant for themselves from the Grand Lodge of Ireland.

\*Brother Milborne has called my attention to Lodge No. 399 I.C. chartered in New York City 1763, of which little more is known,

Given under our hands and seal of our Lodge in the City of Albany, the eleventh day of April, in the year of Masonry 5759, and in the year of our Lord 1759.

Signed

*John Steadman,*  
Secretary  
No. 74, of Ireland.

*Anias Sutherland,* Master  
*Charles Calder,* Senior Warden  
*Thos. Parker,* junior Warden

This 1737 warrant, copied in 1759, was confirmed in 1763 by the Provincial Grand Master of New York, and in 1765 reconfirmed by his successor, Sir John Johnson, later Grand Master of Quebec. Under the name Union, this lodge flourished for 37 years with the same Master. Having been reconfirmed in "all precedents and other privileges as they may or ought to claim", they did claim precedence from 1737 and all privileges that went with it. Disaffection with the Grand Lodge which had been organized in New York city forestalled their acknowledgement of its authority until 1806, when they submitted and are now Mt. Vernon Lodge (3). Perhaps they inherited the fighting spirit of the 2nd Battalion Royal but this looks like something other than "noble contention" for precedence.

In the garrison at Crown Point in 1762, among others, Lodge Number 7 P.G.L.N.Y. was at work in the 55th Regiment of Foot and made Masons among the colonial officers on duty there. Three Master Masons by name and "nine other Masons" were recommended to the Grand Lodge at Boston as "highly worthy . . . for holding a Lodge . . . in the Colony of Connecticut". Two years later they were warranted by St. Johns Provincial Grand Lodge (Modern), but twenty years later and after the war, under the same leadership, they applied to the Massachusetts Grand Lodge (Ancient) for a charter. When the Grand Lodge of Connecticut was organized a small group continued to work in Norwich under their old charter, while others organized a third lodge in the same community under a Connecticut charter.

The creation of an assistant master and assistant wardens at Albany was an ingenious device and perhaps unique. But I am reminded of what happened at Alexandria, Virginia when the lodge there surrendered their Pennsylvania charter in exchange for one from the Grand Lodge of Virginia. The first name among the four grantees was that of George Washington, but the second name was that of a man who was chosen Deputy Master and who functioned as the working head of the lodge while Washington held the title of Master. Washington was chosen Master at the next election but it has never been conclusively proven that he ever actually presided over, that lodge or any other.

At Boston in 1752 a group of Masons who did not find themselves in complete accord with the high-toned or "silk stocking" Masonry of St. Johns Provincial Grand Lodge (Modern), organized a more democratic group which was chartered under date of 1756 by the Grand Lodge of Scotland as the Lodge of St. Andrew.

In 1769 three regiments came to garrison the forts at Boston as a deterrent to the rising opposition in the city against tariff and trade control measures which the Boston merchants and shipping interests considered oppressive. The 14th regiment had with it Lodge Number 58 chartered by the "Atholl" Grand Lodge of England; the 29th regiment had Lodge Number 322 under Irish Constitution; and the 64th regiment had Lodge Number 106 under Scottish registry. These lodges cooperated with the Lodge of St. Andrew in the organization of the Massachusetts Grand Lodge (Ancient).

Here in Boston the earliest record of conferral of the Royal Arch and the Knight Templar degrees was in August 1769 under sanction of St. Andrews Royal Arch Lodge. During that same month four members of army Lodge No. 322 are on record as visitors to the Lodge of St. Andrew and unquestionably brought those degrees with them. The evolution of the Royal Arch chapters and Knight Templar commanderies some 25 years later is a story which merits separate treatment and I will leave that to someone else.

A curious commentary on the increase of interest in the fraternity in America at that time may be found in the diary of Ezra Stiles, a strict Congregational parson, and later president of Yale. Rather than the military, he credits the Church of England for the spread of Freemasonry, saying "We see this spirit of Episcopal Intrigue already working with great Cunning. It has set up and recommended the Fraternity of free Masons & is pressing them apace into a Subserviency & Subordination to the great End of increasing the Church . . . The Free Masons have already within about a dozen years increased from three to 13 or 14 Lodges".

When a state of war developed in the American colonies, Masons in the Continental army followed the practise which they knew was common in royal regiments, since many of them had been participants. No less than ten military lodges were chartered to be held in the patriot forces, and others are known to have been active. The most notable was American Union Lodge, organized at the siege of Boston in February 1776, which worked in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey as well. The records, still extant, record the names of more than 450 Masons who after the war scattered all over the young nation and carried their Masonry with them. No one can doubt that the system of work and lectures in American Union was the pattern followed in many jurisdictions. The minutes, however, contain no hint of any degrees other than the usual three of the symbolic lodge. The lodge sat only while the Connecticut brigade, in which it was held, was in cantonment or winter quarters.

New York city was the headquarters of the royal army all during the Revolutionary War, from the summer of 1776 when it was occupied by the British, after driving out the colonials, until evacuated belatedly on November 3rd 1783 when the last units boarded ship and sailed for Halifax. The city was not only headquarters for the high command, it was a garrison town for a large reserve, a base for naval operations and a sanctuary for the loyalists. Masonry flourished and a half dozen or more regimental lodges were exceedingly active whenever not in the field. I will not list them in detail.

Interest was so high that it was determined to organize a grand lodge and accordingly a warrant was obtained from the "Atholl" Grand Lodge of Ancients in London. How the transition from military and loyalist, to civilian and republican makeup was effected is a story in itself and time will not permit me to draw out that chapter tonight. Suffice it to say that the present Grand Lodge of New York is in direct succession to the one organized by and from the British military lodges in New York city during the Revolution.

During 1783, when it was generally known that negotiations had been concluded to settle the terms under which the American colonies were to be recognized as independent, there was relatively free intercourse between the still occupied New York city and outside territory. But it was largely one sided, that is, the Americans were admitted freely, especially with country produce, but the garrison was restricted. During this time American Masons visited lodges in the city and acquired the Royal Arch and Knight Templar degrees. The Mark degree and the Royal Arch appear to have been disseminated quite freely. The Knight Templar degree may not have been conferred so liberally, but as early as 1785 there were a sufficient number in New York city so that they had a place as escort in a Masonic procession.

But a most unusual development took place in Connecticut. Representatives of a dozen or more lodges met in convention to consider organization of a grand lodge, but there was no agreement on how to proceed. Some favored an independent grand lodge to be organized by a simple declaration of the fact, an action such as was taken by four lodges in London in 1717, and had been done in several of the colonies. Another group favored the establishment of a National Grand Lodge with George Washington as General Grand Master, by whom the grand lodge in Connecticut would be authorized, empowered and constituted. A third group favored obtaining a charter from London as had been done in New York city, and a delegation was sent down to learn how it could be done.

The emissary was Samuel Holden Parsons, a former brigadier general in the Continental army, and a Past Master of American Union Lodge. The Grand Master in New York city was Rev. William Walter, a loyalist and a chaplain in the royal establishment, but, as it happened, a class mate of Parsons at Harvard. However, Walter was about to relinquish the chair of Grand Master and remove to Halifax. The committee appointed by the Grand Lodge of New York offered their fraternal assistance to Connecticut in obtaining a charter from London. But they loftily included an offer to qualify and instruct the officers whom Connecticut might choose pending the arrival of a warrant. This condescension, and practical obstacles to Masonic intercourse between New York and London, partly accounts for a postponement of six years before the lodges in Connecticut, chartered from three different sources, finally went ahead and formed their own grand lodge without outside help, as they should have done to begin with.

Meanwhile mention of the Knight Templar degree had shown up in the development of Masonic activity in Charleston, South Carolina. St. Andrews Lodge in Pensacola, Florida had been chartered by James Grant, Provincial Grand Master for the Southern District of North America, and appears to have moved with the military forces and accompanying civilians when Pensacola was evacuated. The move was made to Charleston, then in British control. A certificate issued in March 1782 evidences conferral of the Knight Templar degree, and another issued in August 1783 mentions both the Royal Arch and the Knight Templar degrees. There was also an "Atholl" Lodge No. 190 in Charleston, but the loss of all Masonic records for the Revolutionary period leaves us with no more than the information we deduce from these surviving certificates. They show, however, that the British army influence was strong and that during the occupation the Royal Arch and Knight Templar degrees were introduced.

The last episode I will relate took place in Connecticut where the first Royal Arch Chapter in America, to be organized as such, came into being through the initiative of a prisoner of war. Taken off a British transport by a colonial privateer and brought in to be interned at Middletown, Connecticut was an officer in the Hanoverian auxiliaries of the British forces, John Lewis DeKoven.

He must have been an enthusiastic Mason, and a persuasive fellow, as we find that soon after his arrival in 1783 the lodge at Middletown was resuscitated from its war time dormancy, and DeKoven took the initiative in organizing a "Grand" Royal Arch Chapter, that is, a chapter which was self constituted and independent, although it was formed under sanction of the local lodge. This was an unusual thing to do in Connecticut, and St. Johns Lodge in Middletown is the only one, and there were a dozen in the state at that time, to lend its sanction to a Royal Arch chapter. It almost looks as though it was revived for that purpose.

In this chapter we find the earliest mention of the conferral of the Mark degree yet found in the western hemisphere, the date of September 13, 1783 ante-dating by a few months the record Brother Harris uncovered in Nova Scotia. The minutes for the Mark Lodge, the Most Excellent Lodge and the Royal Arch Chapter were kept in separate books for nearly thirty years, and have been reproduced in photocopy. The original members of the chapter had been arched either in the army, or in one case in Carolina, obviously in Charleston.

DeKoven's enthusiasm was not confined to Masonry. Although he contracted a perfectly respectable marriage, apparently his European gallantry did not fit into the mores of the Land of Steady Habits. He began to wander from the straight and narrow path, and when he was caught chasing a neighbor's wife, the irate husband chased him out of town. On the way out, he sold his mark, the anchor of hope, and he is said to have fled to Canada.

In the last decade of the 18th century Masonry began to become more or less stabilized in the several states with recognition of the Mark and Royal Arch and Templar degrees as "higher" grades. Then came the organizers and improvers. Thomas Smith Webb is generally credited with being the moving spirit in organization and development of the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, and the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, more or less what we have in the states today, where generally they are viewed as something to advance to, or through. The Grand Lodges, however, were strong enough to resist an overall, national or supreme grand lodge.

This superstructure on the blue lodge was not accepted enthusiastically by all the Craft and we find in New Hampshire grand lodge records a caustic comment on its popularity. Thomas Thompson, Grand Master, when retiring from the chair of King Solomon in 1808, warned the grand lodge against "innovations", saying among other things "the Grand Lodge of New Hampshire was founded on the true ancient York Masonic principles . . . and has hitherto proved the center of union . . . But this harmony is in danger of being disturbed by the introduction of Royal Arch Masonry, and other fanciful degrees, assuming a power independent of the Grand Lodge . . . Some respectable Brethren who stood on high Masonic ground, impatient to distinguish themselves above their Brothers and fellows, and move in a more exalted sphere, have inconsiderately introduced and established . . . Royal Arch Chapters under self created foreign authorities. Others, attracted by the pomp and show of those fanciful degrees, have joined them, to the prejudice and neglect of true Masonry. But of all the Masonic titles there is none so truly ridiculous in America as that of Knight Templars; a compound of enthusiasm and folly, generated in the brains of pilgrims and military madmen; as opposite to the benevolent spirit of true Masonry as black aprons are to pure white ones. The history of these degrees is very obscure. They were adopted in England . . . by some disaffected Lodges of Ancient (not York) Masons, and conferred by them in opposition to the Grand Lodge in London. About forty years ago, I passed through all the degrees then known in England, to my great disappointment. . . . Men of fancy may continue to invent, and vanity may promote new, fanciful and mock degrees, but observation and experience have confirmed me in the opinion that they are useless; made up of pomp, pageantry and show, with lofty, high sounding titles of Kings, High Priests, Scribes etc.; all unmasonic and imposing. I am convinced that the three first and original degrees alone are Universal Masonry. They have, and forever will stand the test of time. They inculcate all the religious duties, all the social and moral virtues, and every good that can be practised between man and man. They illustrate and explain all the useful arts and sciences. . . . Webb makes thirteen degrees, and ranks the Royal Arch as the seventh. In England they formerly conferred but five degrees, and the Royal Arch was the ne plus ultra. . . . I must enjoin it upon you . . . that you do invariably pursue the true ancient system of Masonry, which alone can insure union, harmony and fellowship



My research is admittedly far from exhaustive and I hope my presentation has not been too casual for those who delight in the citation of chapter and verse. I have tried to point up the fact that wherever the British army lodge traveled and worked, there was always some spread of influence, or some missionary work done, and that Masonry remained when the military lodge departed. Further, that we owe the introduction of the Royal Arch and Knight Templar degrees to the army lodges, which thus furnished us with the nucleus from which the "York Rite" or American system, followed in the United States today, has been developed.

But this thesis may be wrong. You remember earlier I quoted Stiles who gave credit to "Episcopal intrigue" for the spread of Masonry in the American colonies. He never mentioned the army at all, but in 1780 he had quite a different idea. His diary then reads "Masgnry bad..... declined at the beginning of Geo I reign - when being . . . joined by..... some of the Scots . . . the fraternity hath spread and multiplied its lodges. It is well suited to introduce that traveling nation into all the world. It gives them a respectable access everywhere. When they like the Jesuits begin to make this fraternity to lose its generality and Universal benevolence in sinister and national illiberal views, a storm will arise. But at present the fraternity will flourish."

I repeat his last sentence - "But at present the fraternity will flourish" - and I fervently pray he was right!

*Read at  
the 41st meeting  
of the  
Canadian Masonic Research Association  
Montreal  
19th February 1965.*

=====  
1998-01-01