

METHODS OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

By
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There is hardly a better way to seek more light in Freemasonry than to conduct historical research. Yet many who would like to undertake an historical project do not know how to begin, not to mention complete a work of history. This paper will attempt to orient the beginner as to how to accomplish an historical study and will deal with six aspects: one, the personal characteristics of the researcher; two, how to select a topic; three, how to find information; four, how to file and retrieve information; five, thoughts on evaluating data; and six, tips on writing.

Recognizing the inadequacy of such a short paper to the scope of the task, I hope at least that your appetite will be whetted to embark on a research project. Further, I would like to offer my services to conduct a seminar on historical research for members of this Lodge of Research. It seems that the best time to conduct the seminar would be after lunch on the day of the lodge's regular meeting. Announcements in the Trestleboard will follow if there is enough interest from the craft.

Before outlining methods of historical research, it is necessary to dwell briefly on characteristics of the researcher himself. Research may not be suited to everyone, but many have the capability to study if they know what is expected and what personal traits they should possess. A most important trait is curiosity; one should have a deep desire to learn more about a given subject. Although there may well be other motivators, curiosity serves one perhaps best to help one sustain the energy and interest of a project. Patience and perseverance are two related character traits that are also most desirable. The study of history should ideally be viewed as a lifetime's occupation; to perform well requires systematic accumulation of information which usually cannot be rushed despite the revolution of the computer age in which we live. It often takes months if not years to gather enough information and insights to produce a worthy article or book of history. Finally, the complete researcher should aspire to wisdom. The analysis of human experience requires all the knowledge and understanding the historian can muster to deal with his topic. Reading widely, observing human nature, and seeking broadening experiences are some ways to gain this elusive virtue. A work of history is only as good as the person who produced it, for he acts as a filter of information between the reader and the past. Now let us proceed to the actual process of research and writing itself.[1]

Selecting a topic is probably the most important and also most difficult step in research. In essence, this step involves finding a question to answer. There are several ways to go about finding a subject. For many this involves an introspective process, asking questions of oneself such as what are my interests. What experience have I had or what studies have I done earlier on which I can now build to produce a new study? What have I always wanted to know but never had time to pursue? Permit me to illustrate topic selection introspectively using my own case as an example. Examining my collections at home, which I submit are a good indicator of my interests, two Masonic topics stood out. The first topic was opposition to

Freemasonry in Nazi Germany; I had collected a number of books written by Nazis in the 1930's vilifying Freemasonry, which the Nazis considered to be one of their arch enemies along with Jews and communists.[2] This seems to be a rich field to explore. Second, I noticed that I had been collecting a lot of Masonic music, which included a two-record album of music Mozart had written for the craft. Also found in my library were three volumes of music published in Berlin in 1834 for the Grand Lodge in Berlin.[3]

There are many questions one could ask about this music: who wrote the latter? How was it used in the Lodge? What influenced the writing of such music? Did other lodges in the world use the music? Could we not perform this music as part of an historical discussion and perhaps incorporate its use in lodges in the United States.

Another method to select a topic is sometimes called the "general specific" technique. The idea is to start reading in general words (on Freemasonry) until one finds a specific topic that attracts attention.[4] Then pursue this topic. I used this method in selecting the topic for my master's thesis. Knowing that I was interested in general in the period of the French Revolution, I began reading about this great event until a footnote caught my eye about a German scientist who sailed around the world with Captain Cook and later tried to import democracy into Germany during the French Revolution. The biography of this scientist, Georg Forster (1754-94) became the subject not only of my master's thesis but also of my doctoral dissertation.

Some historians consider availability of sources, especially primary or unpublished sources, to be a determining factor in choosing a subject. If one knows of the existence of information such as lodge records, correspondence, diaries, or other documents of the past, these can serve as the basis of a study. Many of us have access to such valuable information right in our own lodges or homes and never thought to exploit it. Although it is not absolutely necessary to employ primary sources in order to gain respectability as an historian, it is at least an indicator that one is exploring a fresh subject if one can determine that these sources have not been tapped or at least not exhausted if already used.

A final way to find a topic is to consult other historians for their advice. Most would be more than willing to assist and can often save you months of wasted effort; experienced researchers often encounter more good topics than they can possibly handle themselves. One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was from an old German professor who urged me to become a letter-writer. Introduce yourself, share ideas, obtain assistance, and join in the fraternity of historians. Writing letters is helpful, of course, not only in finding a topic but also in learning about new sources of information published and unpublished as well as discovering other historians who may be working in your field.

Before leaving the question of topic selection, permit me a comment on the quality of topics. It strikes me that Masonic research has been quite one-sided, too often focusing on internal rather than external matters. By internal I mean studies on ritual or the furnishings of the lodge, e.g., the origins of the gavel. Somewhat neglected it seems have been studies on the relationship of Freemasonry to the outside world.

For example, I have long been interested in the role of Masonry in the American and French Revolutions. While some studies have appeared on these subjects, most have been of poor quality and few have been written by Masons. A recent book on Masonry's interaction with the general society is Lynn Dumenil's "Freemasonry and American Culture". [5] Although written by a woman with no apparent connection to Freemasonry, the book is a solid piece of research that chronicles how the craft evolved in the 19th century and adapted successfully to the changing social environment. By the way, such a book is recommended reading for today's Masons who are struggling with this very problem of declining membership during a period of dramatic change in our society.

Finding information is easily the most time-consuming phase of a research project. We all have some idea as to where information can be found - primarily in a library, but most college graduates are completely unfamiliar with how to use a library. Yes, we all spent a lot of time there in college, but most (including me, I must confess) were more involved in socializing or sleeping than anything else.

Thus, the first step is to take a bit of time to become familiar with the workings of a good library and to gain an acquaintanceship with the major tools of gaining access to its holdings. At the school of hard knocks I have collected three tips about using a library that I would like to share. First, be redundant in searching for information. Although computers are taking over this field, I urge you to use all possible ways of determining the holdings of a library: e.g., card catalogues, indices, and bibliographies. There does not yet exist, nor do I expect that any system will ever be created that contains all the information one seeks. Second, become a browser. When fetching a book from the stacks, take a minute to scan the other books in the area. In a well organized library, related books are usually stored together and one can usually expand the yield of the search by merely browsing. Furthermore, the serendipity phenomenon can often take place; one can sometimes find a book on the shelf by chance that may be the most important source for one's entire project. Once I found an important book on the shelf that was not listed in the catalogue and that the librarian did not know existed. Third, ask the reference librarian for assistance. Many beginning researchers are loathe to ask for help fearing perhaps that they will reveal their ignorance by asking a question. But that is why the librarian is sitting there and this person has been trained and is usually most anxious to aid nice people like ourselves.

Historians are somewhat handicapped in finding information compared to students of contemporary affairs, who have many more research aids at their disposal. But some of these aids can be of value to historians as well, such as the guides to journal literature, "The Social Science Index" or the "Public Affairs Information Service". Historians can also benefit from "The Readers Guide to Periodical Literature" and newspaper indices such as the "New York Times Index". Manuscripts are usually catalogued in most countries; in the United States there is the "National Union Catalogue of Manuscripts". Many countries also have agencies such as England's Historical Manuscripts Commission that will assist researchers in finding unpublished material, letters, diaries, and the like. Again, letter-writing is an invaluable tool in discovering sources of information.

Historians of Freemasonry have an even greater handicap than the average historian. There is no one library to my knowledge in the country that contains a really comprehensive collection. In the Washington area, the two best libraries are located at the George Washington Masonic Memorial and at the Scottish Rite Temple on 16th Street. Although there are many Masonic publications that appear in the United States and Europe, there does not appear to be any index for the researcher. (Appended to this paper in Appendix 2 is a list of American publications cited in Dumenil's book). Probably the best journal of Masonic history is "Ars Quatuor Coronatorum", published by Quatuor Coronati Lodge in London, the "premier lodge of Masonic research in the world". One can easily join the Corresponding Circle of this lodge and obtain copies of the journal for the nominal cost of membership. Masons are also not very well served with quick reference works where one can easily flesh out and give authority to a given point with a pertinent fact. Many of the lexicons that have appeared are of questionable value, although one handy source is quite useful, Pick & Knight, "The Pocket History of Freemasonry".[6]

Although much of research is quite tedious, there is the excitement of the historian as detective, where one's imagination and inventiveness can run wild. Hunting for information and places to find it outside of the standard library is an important part of our task in many projects. The various kinds of government records: census, criminal, court cases, tax rolls, immigration information, and diplomatic correspondence can be treasure troves of useful material. Perhaps a short summary of my own research on the biography of Georg Forster could well illustrate the point. Having located his letters and diaries that had been published as well as all of his own published works, I prepared to travel to England to try to reconstruct his life there during the period 1766-1778. I first made a list of all the names of persons and institutions mentioned and wrote to each of the latter such as the Royal Society in London to ask permission to consult their records. Before leaving for London, I also consulted the manuscript catalogues of other countries; finding papers of these people listed as being held in various libraries around the world, I wrote to each archive or library and ordered copies of materials pertaining to Forster. Arriving in London, we (my wife came along to help) then searched the listings for some 200 names at the Historical Manuscript Commission and found further locations of pertinent materials. One of the best finds was a multi-volume diary manuscript of one of his closest friends, located in the British Museum. The diary mentioned my subject almost every entry. Other finds included the following. The Royal Society had original letters written by Forster as well as minutes of meetings that mentioned him frequently. Tax records revealed the amount of his payments which helped paint a picture of the family's financial status. Business records corroborated the firm where he was an apprentice and described the nature of the international trading company. British Admiralty records contained information in the form of correspondence, ship logs, and diaries of the crew which revealed much information about Forster's voyage around the world with Captain Cook. All of this information and more permitted rather a detailed sketch of Forster's life while living in England.[7]

One should not have the impression, however, that the historian as detective is uninterrupted joy. If there is a five percent return on one's effort in such a search that would be considered a lot. But that five percent can make your day (not to mention your month sometimes). One area where we encountered particular frustration involved Forster's Masonic life in England. Having read that his father was a Mason, I wrote to the Grand Lodge of England which answered that he was indeed made a Mason in Warrington, England, in 1766. Alas, the Warrington Lodge, which was founded in 1764 and had continuous records from 1790, had lost the minute book that would have contained the information we sought.

Collection a lot of information over a long period of time, as is usually the case in an historical project, requires a system of retrieval. Otherwise, it is maddening to know that there is a crucial bit of information someplace but it cannot be found when needed. No one can dictate what technology should be used -file cards, computer files, Xerox files, or notebooks. The main thing is that there is a system and each individual designs his own to suite his style. It is important to remember that the system must be used from the very beginning to avoid losing time to go back and do it right later. Virtually all researchers use some kind of double entry system that is based on two pillars; bibliography and substantive information. Accurate records must be kept of bibliography. This may sound overly pedantic, but one must be sure to use the proper format for bibliographic entries from the very beginning, which saves one from having to waste costly time redoing citations. Most academics use Kate Turabian, "A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations". [8] But if one intends to publish an article in a particular journal, it is wise to note the style guide that is used, because editors frequently have their own variations. I still use 3x5 note cards kept in a shoe box for my bibliography. If you are unable to memorize the proper format for the basic kinds of citations, i.e., books and articles, make sample cards to have handy for reference. My bibliography cards contain much more information than just the mere citation; I use them as a running account of the history and utility of each source. For example, I always record the library number of the book, should I have to find the book again. I keep a record of the libraries consulted for the work (whether I found it there or not) to prevent going to the wrong library. An evaluation of the work should be briefly noted - its usefulness, strengths and weaknesses, and bias of the author. Finally, I also note the source where I found the work cited for use primarily in ordering from inter-library loan. Libraries require the source of a citation before accepting a loan request, because there are occasionally works cited that never existed and librarians like to verify the information before trying to find the work for the customer.

The other pillar of a double-entry system, the substantive information, is cross-referenced with the bibliographical. Information should be filed in the following manner. Divide the project into categories, if possible, at the beginning. The categories usually correspond to the major sections of the study. When taking notes while consulting each work, note the source each time along with the information. In addition, use a separate location for each category for each work. Because this description can be confusing, let me illustrate using note cards. While extracting information from a book, make a separate note card for each of the categories of information, where applicable of course. Whenever a work is consulted, continue the

procedure. When the information-gathering is complete, one can arrange the cards by categories from all the sources, ready to write. In this way, all the cards pertaining to a given section can be grouped together in preparation for analyzing and writing up the information. Where I used note cards as an example, others could just as well use computer files, folders of Xerox copies, or notebooks in the same way. The main point is that one uses a system which permits organizing large amounts of information while keeping track of the sources at the same time.

Evaluating the information and its sources is a continuing process from the beginning to the very end of a project. Finding the truth is the object of this aspect of research and may be especially difficult to accomplish when studying Freemasonry. The craft is permeated with myths, legends, and symbolism which greatly enrich its message. But this richness can complicate the work of the historian whose task is to separate myths from reality. But the symbolism of Masonry is but one pitfall that can sidetrack the historian. He may have problems with logic which can lead to false conclusions or interpretation of material, as is well discussed in David Hackett Fischer's book, "Historians' Fallacies".[9] One of the many examples he cites is false causation; there may be a chronological connection between two events, but it may be false to draw a cause-and-effect conclusion. For example, Pete fires a pistol and immediately afterwards John falls dead. While it is possible and perhaps probable that Pete killed John, it may be that John died of a heart attack and was never shot. Frequently historians are led astray because there was intentional deception in the information. George Forster's wife, for example, altered her husband's letters, which she published, in order to present herself in a more favorable light having been caught cheating in the marriage. Historians unaware of her deception painted a much rosier picture of the Forster marriage than was true until archival research discovered the truth. Frequently deception is involved unintentionally as people normally tend to exaggerate, place themselves in a better light, or memory fades and tends to forget the bad and accentuate the good.

In addition to deception, there is often the temptation of the good story that becomes repeated in numerous accounts without anyone really checking its veracity. Such stories have become fact for most of us - Mussolini made the trains run on time; Galileo dropped weights from the Tower of Pisa; and Newton discovered gravitation under an apple tree - are all apparently myths.[10]

Besides problems with interpretation of evidence, the historian needs also to be on his guard for bias in secondary works of history. Everyone has some prejudice stemming from one's background, upbringing and environment, and it is impossible to eliminate prejudice from coloring one's interpretation of history. The historian must therefore seek to evaluate the bias of other historians in order to judiciously make use of the work. A good way to try to ascertain the perspective of an author is to find reviews of his work in journals or periodicals. Book reviews are usually listed in the "Book Review Digest".

The final aspect of the historical project is the actual writing. Without getting into the mechanics of writing, I would like to mention some points concerning organization and style. Works of history are frequently considered uninteresting (and Masonic history may have more than its share in this category). This situation can often be traced to problems of organization: many words lack focus. To give this focus, the work needs to address a major question, there must be a reason that this piece is written. Too often facts are merely related without any real meaning to the reader. The author seems proud to have collected information and it became interesting to him. But to involve the reader there should be an angle to explore. Does this specific research shed light on a general question that many a reader may understand? Does the author take a position on a controversial issue? How does the research advance our understanding of Freemasonry? If such questions can underlie the organization of an historical work, the readability should be greatly increased. One pitfall needs to be avoided, however. Many historians, especially beginners, tend to get bogged down in providing the reader background information that they almost forget to deal with their main topic. While the reader should not be left in the dark about the context of the study, a few sentences of orientation are usually sufficient, especially in an article.

Readability is further enhanced by two almost contradictory practices of the historian. First, one should attempt to immerse one's self in the subject as if actually living in the period studied. Reading widely to accumulate knowledge of everyday life, eating, travel, view of the world help the historian not only to enrich his study with pertinent detail but also to evaluate sources of information using the information as a filter. At the same time, the historian must be able to treat his subject with detachment, seeing its blemishes as well as its good side. It seems to be the natural tendency of most researchers to fall in love (or sometimes to hate) one's subject resulting in a distorted picture. Realizing this pitfall, one should strive to achieve a balance and even-handed judgement.

In order to improve one's writing ability one should analyze samples of recognized good historical prose, such as is usually found in "American Heritage" magazine. By paying attention to good writing both consciously and unconsciously one can improve one's own style. My doctoral advisor introduced me to the unconscious method when I began writing my long opus after I submitted the first chapter which was stylistically a bit rough. He gave me a volume of essays by Samuel Eliot Morrison, whom he considered to be the best writer of American English, and urged me to read aloud 15 minutes each day. Sceptically, I followed his advice and was surprised to see how my style changed for the better in a short period of time.

As in most human endeavors, when the mystery is removed and one has some inkling of how something is done, much can be accomplished. So it is hoped with this short essay on historical methodology that interest will be stimulated in a common effort to enrich our experience in Masonry through historical research.

NOTES: [1] An excellent one-volume guide to historical research is Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, "The Modern Researcher", 4th ed. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.

[2] For example, Paul Siabertz, "Freimaurer im Kampf um die Macht", (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1938), and Felix Franz Egon Lutzeler, "Hinter den Kulissen der Weltgeschichte", 2 vols, 2d ed. (Leipzig: Helwingische Verlagsanstalt, 1937).

[3] Mozart, "Complete Masonic Music" (Turnabout TV 34213-14); "Neues Gesangbuch für die große National-Mutterloge zu den drei Weltkugeln in Berlin und deren Tochterlogen" (Berlin: Jonas Brothers, 1834).

[4] William Adrian Brown, curator of the George Washington Masonic National Memorial was kind enough to provide a list of what he considers to be basic reading in Masonry which is contained in Appendix 1.

[5] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[6] Fifth edition (London: Frederick Muller, 1969).

[7] Joseph S. Gordon, Reinhold and Georg Forster in England, 1766-1780 (dissertation Duke University, 1975).

[8] Fourth edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973).

[9] (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970).

[10] Robin W. Winks, ed., "The Historian as Detective: Essays on Evidence" (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968).

Appendix 1

GENERAL WORKS ON FREEMASONRY (Provided By William Adrian Brown)

History of Ancient Egypt, Rawlinson
Egypt's Place in History, Bunsen
Ancient Egyptians, Wilkinson
Records of the past, Birch
Egypt from the Earliest Times, Birch
Secret Societies of all ages and Countries, Heckerthorn
The Ehsenes, Ginsbury
The Ghostics, King
The Mysteries of Freemasonry, Fellows
Alphabets of the seven Planets, Von Hammer
History of Architecture, Fergusen
On Architecture, Hope
History of Art, Lubke
Archaeologia (A Compilation), Zion
Acta Latomorum, Thory
Historie des ancennes Corporations, Onin Lacroix
The Romans in Britain, C. Coote
History and development of the Guilds, Brentano
English Guilds, Smith
The History of Freemasonry (London Edition), Carson
American Edition of the Same, Carson
Masonic Sketches and Reprints, Hughan
Early History and Antiquities of Freemasonry, Fort
History of Freemasonry in Europe, Rebold
History of Freemasonry, Laurie
History of Freemasonry, Findel
History of Freemasonry, Krause
History of Freemasonry and Concordant Orders
Masonic History and Digest, Mitchell
Origin and Early History of Freemasonry, Steinbrenner
Masonic History, The A&A Scottish Rite, Folger
History of the Knights Templars, Addison
History of the Knights Templars, De Vogue
Illustrations of Freemasonry, Preston
The Traditions of Freemasonry, Preston
Land Marks of Freemasonry, Oliver
Constitutions, Anderson
Ahiman Rezon, Dermott
Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, Mackey
Royal Cyclopaedia of Freemasonry, English
Encyclopaedia of Biblical Literature, Kitto
Chamber's Encyclopaedia, Chamber
Dictionary of the Bible, Smith
Clark's Commentaries, Clark
Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Gibbon
History of Germany, Kolrausch
History of England, Macauley

Appendix 2
MASONIC MAGAZINES AND LOCAL LODGE BULLETINS
(Cited in Lynn Dumenil, "Freemasonry in American Culture")

Acorn News (Oakland, California)
American Freemason (Storm Lake, Iowa)
American Mason (Washington, DC; also known as the Craftsman)
American Tyler (Detroit & Grand Rapids, Michigan; also known as Tyler-Keystone)
Brotherhood (New York)
Builder (Anamosa, Iowa)
Bulletin, San Francisco
Bodies No. 1, A&ASR (San Francisco)
CapitalNews Service (Washington, DC)
Duluth Masonic Calendar (Duluth, Minnesota)
Fellowship Forum (Washington, DC)
Freemason (Los Angeles)
Freemasonry and Eastern Star (Los Angeles; also known as Southwestern Freemason)
Freemasons' Repository (Providence, Rhode Island)
High Nooner (Chicago)
High-Twelvian (Kansas City, Kansas)
Illinois Freemason (Bloomington)
Indiana Freemason (Franklin)
Ivanhoe Masonic News (Kansas City, Missouri)
Junior Warden (San Francisco)
Kansas City Freemason (Kansas City, Kansas)
Craftsman (see American Mason)
Live Oak Bulletin (Oakland, California)
Masonic Advocate (Indianapolis, Indiana)
Masonic Analyst (Portland, Oregon)
Masonic Bulletin (Canton, Ohio)
Masonic Bulletin (Cleveland, Ohio)
Masonic Bulletin (Long Beach, California)
Masonic Chronicle (Columbus, Ohio)
Masonic Digest (Los Angeles)
Masonic Herald (Rome, Georgia)
Masonic Home Journal (Louisville, Kentucky)
Masonic Monthly (San Francisco)
Masonic Outlook (New York)
Masonic Record (San Francisco)
Masonic Review (Cincinnati, Ohio)
Masonic Review (New York)
Masonic Standard (New York)
Masonic World (San Francisco)
Master Mason (Washington, DC)
Murad's Mirror (Burlington, Iowa)
New Age Magazine (Washington, DC)
New England Craftsman (Boston)
Oklahoma Mason (McAlester, Oklahoma)
Pacific Craftsman (San Francisco; also known as Pacific Lodge Bulletin)
Pacific Mason (Seattle, Washington; also known as Pacific Freemason)
Sciot Booster (Sacramento, California)
Sciots Journal (San Francisco)
Scottish Rite Bulletin (Duluth, Minnesota)

Scottish Rite Clip Service (Washington, DC)
Shawnee Light (Louisville, Kentucky)
Short Talk Bulletin of the Masonic Service Association of the United States (Washington, DC)
Southern Masonic Journal (Birmingham, Alabama)
Southwestern Freemason (see Freemasonry and Eastern Star)
Square and Compass (Utica, New York)
Stockton Trumpeter (Stockton, California)
Temple Topics (Mount Morris, Illinois)
Texas Freemason (San Antonio)
Texas Masonic Journal (Fort Worth)
Trestleboard (San Francisco)
Trestleboard of New York (New York)
Tyler-Keystone (see American Tyler)
Universal Craftsman (Cleveland, Ohio)
Universal Engineer (New York)
Voice of Masonry (Chicago)