

Some Basic Information about Cryptic Masonry

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(This paper is intended to present some information to stimulate discussion. It is based on limited research by Paul M. Bessel, who is solely responsible for any errors and who would welcome any corrections or suggestions.)

What is "Cryptic Masonry" and the "Cryptic Rite"?

The Cryptic Rite is "one of the smallest but one of the most important and certainly one of the most curious of all the rites," according to *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia*. "Crypt" comes from a Greek word meaning "hide, conceal, or secret," and thus has come to mean a vault, cave, or other place of underground concealment. The Cryptic degrees are centered on stories involving a vault or crypt where certain treasures were hidden beneath King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem for very specific purposes. They were first called "Cryptic" by Rob Morris, a very influential Mason in the 1800's.

Which degrees are included in the Cryptic Rite?

Cryptic Masonry now consists of the two degrees that concern the crypt or vault under King Solomon's Temple, the Royal Master degree and the Select Master degree. These originally had no relation to each other, and were only combined into a Rite until after they had each existed for many years.

In some states the Super Excellent Master degree is also included in the Cryptic Rite, but some say it should not be because it does not deal with the "crypt" story and it is not really a degree but a ceremony. However, it is described as a beautiful ceremony, and it is not clear why some call it a ceremony rather than a degree.

In what order should the Cryptic degrees be conferred?

Masons have disagreed for many years whether the Royal or the Select degree should be conferred first, and whether they should both be conferred before or after the Royal Arch degree. Both should precede the Royal Arch degree, which is based on the rebuilding of the Temple after it had been destroyed, yet in most States only those who have first gone through the Royal Arch degree can obtain the Royal and Select Masters degrees.

Governance of Cryptic Masonry

There is a General Grand Council over the Cryptic Rite in the U.S., which helps bring about uniformity of ritual, etc. The Grand Councils in each State are sovereign, and individual Councils of Royal and Select Masters are usually chartered and governed by the Grand Councils. In two States (Virginia and West Virginia) the Royal and Select Master degrees are conferred in Royal Arch Chapters.

What are the origins of the Cryptic degrees?

As with much of Freemasonry, no one knows for sure but there are several theories. There is a "Baltimore theory," and a "Berlin theory," but the most likely one is the "Scottish Rite theory," and the most interesting is the "Stuart theory."

The Scottish Rite theory is that the Cryptic degrees were invented in France together with the other degrees that were included in the Rite of Perfection, which later were collected into what is today the Scottish Rite, and that the Cryptic degrees were brought to America just like the Scottish Rite degrees by Stephen Morin from France in 1761. When the Supreme Council for the Southern Jurisdiction of the U.S. was organized in 1802 in Charleston, the degrees which are now in the Scottish Rite were organized, while some "detached" degrees, including the Royal and Select degrees, which had previously been given were now dropped. Some of those who had received these degrees then conferred them on their own and established Councils in the process.

The Stuart theory is interesting and needs some explanation. The Stuart family ruled England starting in 1603, with a break from 1649 to 1660 after Charles I was executed by Parliament under Oliver Cromwell. The last Stuart to reign, James II, was forced to abdicate in 1688. After the Hanoverian family came to the English throne in 1714 with George I, the Stuarts invaded England in 1715 and 1745, by way of Scotland, which supported them, but both attempts failed. The Stuarts and their supporters lived in exile in France, which recognized their claim, and they continued to try to regain their throne for many years with the support of some in England. The Stuart exiles living in France in the early 1700's, sometimes called "Jacobites" from the Latin form of the name for James, were involved in Freemasonry. Some Masonic lodges in France and Italy were made up completely of Jacobites, and the grandson of James II, "Bonnie Prince Charlie" was definitely an active Mason. In 1745, the same year he attempted to invade England, he became the Grand Master of the Masonic Knights Templar, and also formed a Chapter of Rose Croix. The Jacobite Masons considered the death of Hiram Abiff to represent the execution by the English Parliament of Charles I, the father of James II, and the raising of Hiram Abiff to represent the coming restoration to the English throne of the Stuart Kings. The "Royal Master" was the Stuart claimant to the throne, who was called by some the "Pretender" to the throne (at first James II, then his son James III, and then the grandson, Charles), and the secret vault was the place where the Jacobites plotted their return to power. The "Select Masters" were the closest companions of the "Pretender.". The ritual of the Select Master's degree can easily be seen to be that of a secret political movement, if one believes this theory.

How did Cryptic Masonry spread in America?

The Select Master degree was probably first conferred in America about 1790 in Jamaica by Moses Cohen under what became the Scottish Rite. By 1792 Cohen was in the United States conferring the degree of "Select Master of Twenty-seven" on many Masons. The Royal Master degree was probably first conferred in America in 1810 in New York.

The Select and Royal degrees first came together in 1818 when Jeremy Ladd Cross started conferring them and establishing Councils of Royal and Select Masters. Cross and other Masons like him travelled extensively and spread these, plus other degrees, for a fee. At that time degrees were not institutionalized as they are now, and were frequently legally conferred and taught by traveling Masons who earned their living by doing that. They obtained their authority from Grand Lodges or Grand Masters, but traveled widely outside the States where they had been appointed.

Who were the key figures in the spread of the Cryptic degrees in America?

Jeremy Ladd Cross (1783-1861) was the originator of the Cryptic Rite as we know it. He lived most of his life in New Hampshire and Connecticut. His education, grammar, and knowledge of Masonry were poor but he had an excellent memory for ritual. He said, "When you memorize what I am teaching you, you will know as much about Masonry as I do." It was said that he always did the ritual in the same way, repeating the same instructions in the same words, varying neither gesture, step, syllable, or letter. Cross was a student of Thomas Smith Webb, the most famous American Masonic ritualist. Cross received authorization from several Grand Masters to travel and teach any of the degrees in Masonry in any state. He did this, making his living from fees for the degrees, plus selling his books and Masonic regalia, and in the process establishing Councils of Royal and Select Masters.

James Cushman (1776-1829) was a chief promoter of the Cryptic Rite. He was from Maine and Connecticut, and he also travelled widely to confer degrees. He was Grand Lecturer in several Masonic bodies and jurisdictions, and established many Councils as well as other Masonic bodies.

John Barker, from South Carolina, was a student of Jeremy Ladd Cross who was also active in organizing Councils in the 1820's, but under a warrant from the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction, with which he had disputes.

Philip P. Eckel (1768-1831) was the foremost Mason in Maryland in the early 1800's. Originally from Germany, he came with his father to Baltimore around 1781. Eckel gave Cross the authority to confer and spread the Cryptic degrees, and Cross kept Eckel informed of his progress.

Cryptic Masonry in the Scottish Rite or York Rite?

Although the history of the Cryptic degrees is connected with the Scottish Rite degrees, Cryptic Masonry is now a part of the York, or American Rite. In 1850 the Scottish Rite Supreme Councils claimed jurisdiction over the Cryptic degrees, but they gave up this claim in 1870. Some felt that Scottish Rite degrees (13th) cover similar ground, so the Scottish Rite did not need the Cryptic degrees. Since the discovery in the Royal Arch degree is related to the deposit mentioned in the Royal and Select Master degrees, these degrees are logically in the York Rite.

Cryptic Degrees in Cryptic Councils or Royal Arch Chapters?

There has always been an issue whether the Cryptic degrees should be conferred in Royal Arch Chapters or in separate Councils of Royal and Select Masters.

In 1824 the Maryland Grand Chapter was the first to assert Royal Arch control over the Cryptic degrees, a position it maintained until 1874. In 1829 the General Grand Royal Arch Chapter tried to consolidate the Cryptic and Capitular degrees. In some states, such as Virginia in 1841, the Cryptic degrees were included in Royal Arch Masonry, but in 1853 the General Grand Chapter gave up claimed jurisdiction over the Cryptic degrees.

The "Mississippi Plan" to combine the Cryptic degrees into Royal Arch Chapters

The Mississippi Grand Council proposed in 1873 that each Grand Royal Arch Chapter open a Council of Royal and Select Masters under it, and that the Grand Councils should dissolve themselves. Several states followed this Plan, but many were opposed. Also, the Cryptic degrees seemed to be forgotten in some states where they had been included in the Royal Arch, or Capitular system.

General Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters in the U.S.

The General Grand Council was organized to help stop efforts to combine the Cryptic degrees in Royal Arch Masonry and to bring about more uniformity of ritual and organization in the Cryptic degrees. In 1872 fourteen Grand Councils met in New York and resolved that the Cryptic degrees should be under the exclusive jurisdiction of Councils, with no one who received the degrees in Royal Arch Chapters being recognized. This delayed things, because many Royal and Select Masters had received those degrees in Royal Arch Chapters. It was not until 1880 that a constitution was formed, and the General Grand Council came into existence in 1881 when it was ratified by nine Grand Councils. The first meeting of the General Grand Council was in Denver in 1883.

Cryptic Masonry in Britain

The Council of Excellent, Royal, Select and Super-Excellent Masters was established in 1873 by four Councils which had been chartered two years earlier by the Grand Council of New York. The Grand Council of Illinois chartered Councils in Scotland in 1878, and the Scottish Grand Council was formed in 1880. In England, Cryptic Masonry consists of the Most Excellent Master (a shorter form than the one in U.S. Royal Arch Masonry), Royal Master, Select Master, and Super Excellent Master.

Current Status of Cryptic Masonry

As of 1961 (when *Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia* was published), the General Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters in the U.S. included Grand Councils in most states,

but not Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Illinois, and Texas. Since 1942 the General Grand Council recognized the Royal and Select Master degrees as conferred in the Royal Arch Chapters in Virginia and West Virginia. The General Grand Council directly charters Councils in New Mexico, Panama, Mexico, and the Philippines.

Grand Councils of Royal and Select Masters exist to confer and govern the Cryptic Masonic degrees in most states and some foreign countries. However, Councils have suffered from the same loss of membership as all of Freemasonry during the last thirty or so years (Coil's reported about 300,000 Council members in 1958, and we could estimate half that now), and in many places Cryptic Masonry is facing a struggle to survive and continue its work.

Books with more information

History of the Cryptic Rite, by Eugene E. Hinman, Ray V. Denslow, and Charles C. Hunt, published by the General Grand Council, R&SM, U.S.A., 1931

The Cryptic Rite in Virginia, by William Moseley Brown, published by the Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masons of the Commonwealth of Virginia, 1958

Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia, by Henry Wilson Coil, published by Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply Company, Inc., New York, 1961

Mackey's Revised Encyclopedia of Freemasonry, by Albert G. Mackey, revised and enlarged by Robert I. Clegg, published by Macoy Publishing and Masonic Supply company, Inc., New York, 1946

Gould's History of Freemasonry, revised by Rev. Herbert Poole, published by the Masonic History Company, Chicago, 1951

A History of the Grand Chapter, Royal Arch Masons, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, by Archer Bailey Gay, published by Masonic Home Press, Inc., Highland Springs, Virginia, 1958