



Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons in Virginia  
Grand Council Cryptic Masons in Virginia

# The Keystone

June 2026 Vol. 10 No. 4

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A publication of the Grand Chapter  
and Grand Council in Virginia  
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# The Virginia Keystone Newsletter - June 2026

## **MOST EXCELLENT GRAND HIGH PRIEST/ MOST ILLUSTRIOUS GRAND MASTER'S MESSAGE**

**Ho, Companions!**  
**Son of Man, Mark Well**

**A Call to Purpose, Service,  
and Re-Engagement**

Companions,

On behalf of Lady Amber and Ms. Camdyn, thank you for the warm reception we have received thus far on our travels. We are Blessed to be surrounded by so many great Companions and families. As I continue my travels across our Grand Jurisdiction, I am continually reminded that Royal Arch Masonry is not simply a body we join, it is a calling that we answer.

This year, our theme, *“Son of Man, Mark Well,”* has become more than words upon a pin or banner. It has become a challenge to each of us personally. It is a call to pay attention. To observe carefully. To recognize that the future of our Chapters, our Companions, and our Fraternity depends upon what we choose to notice, and what we choose to do about it.

Too often in life, and even in Masonry, we become so focused on routine that we fail to see the opportunities placed directly before us. We may overlook the Companion quietly sitting in the back of the Chapter room who simply needs encouragement. We may forget



the Brother in Blue Lodge searching for “something more” in his Masonic journey. We may neglect the Companion who has not attended in months because no one reached out to ask how he was doing.

But Royal Arch Masonry teaches us something profound: hidden treasures are not found accidentally. They are discovered by those willing to seek diligently, labor faithfully, and mark well.

That lesson applies directly to our Chapters today.

If we desire strong Chapters, we must intentionally build them. If we desire engaged membership, we must create meaningful experiences. If we desire growth, we must become visible in our Lodges and communities once again.

This is why I continue to emphasize the principles of:

**Recruit. Retain. RE-Engage.**

Recruit the worthy Brother who seeks further light.

Retain the Companion by making our meetings educational, purposeful, and fraternal.

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RE-Engage those who may have drifted away, reminding them that they are still valued members of our Capitular family.

Companions, one of our greatest opportunities this year to put those principles into action is the upcoming Statewide Royal Arch Festival on June 13 in Richmond. This Festival represents far more than a conferral of the Degrees. It is an opportunity to welcome worthy Master Masons into the fullness of Capitular Masonry and introduce them to the deeper lessons, friendships, and spiritual teachings of the Royal Arch.

I encourage every Chapter across Virginia to continue actively seeking good men, men of character, integrity, and faith, who are searching for further light in Masonry. Our work cannot stop with one successful Festival or one class of candidates. Recruitment is not a seasonal activity; it is a continuous responsibility entrusted to every Companion.

Yet recruitment alone is not enough.

Once these new Royal Arch Masons are Exalted, we must retain them. We must mentor them, involve them, educate them, and make them feel that they are truly part of our Capitular family. The success of our Chapters is not measured simply by the number of petitions received but by the number of Companions who remain active, engaged, and inspired to carry our work forward.

Every newly Exalted Companion represents future leadership, future ritual excellence,

future mentorship, and future service to our Fraternity and communities. They are the ones who will one day continue spreading the good work of Royal Arch Masonry throughout Virginia.

If we mark well the importance of this moment, and faithfully invest in these men, the future of our Grand Chapter will remain bright for generations to come.

Companions, every one of us has a role to play.

Some serve through ritual excellence. Others through mentorship. Some quietly labor behind the scenes, preparing meals, making phone calls, organizing events, or checking on our elderly members. Never underestimate the importance of these acts. Masonry has never been sustained merely through titles or offices, but through faithful service.

The “Son of Man” did not come to be served, but to serve. That example should inspire each of us as Royal Arch Masons. Leadership in our Fraternity is not about position; it is about responsibility. It is about being willing to carry the burden so others may benefit.

I have also been greatly encouraged by the spirit of unity I have witnessed throughout Virginia. Chapters working together. Districts supporting one another. Companions stepping forward to assist with festivals, education, charitable causes, and community outreach. This is the spirit that strengthens Royal Arch Masonry.

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In the months ahead, we have tremendous opportunities before us, opportunities to welcome new candidates, revitalize our Chapters, and leave our Craft stronger than we found it.

But we must *Mark Well* the moment we are in.

The future of Royal Arch Masonry in Virginia will not be decided years from now. It is decided today, in our meetings, in our conversations, in our mentorship, and in our willingness to serve.

Let us therefore move forward together with renewed purpose, renewed energy, and renewed commitment.

May we labor faithfully.

May we serve humbly.

And may we always remember:

“For many are called, but few chosen.”

Sincerely and fraternally,

**Son of Man, Mark Well,**

Kyle W. Strickland  
Grand High Priest

## Virtue

“Rejoice, O Sancho, in the humility of thy lineage and scorn not to say, thou camest of labouring men, for when thou are not ashamed thyself, no body will seek to make thee so...If you follow virtue for your mean, and strive to do virtuous deeds, you need not envy those that are born of Princes and great men, for blood is inherited, but virtue is achieved.”

–Don Quixote to Sancho Panza in  
Miguel de Cervantes *Don Quixote*

“Beware of men who flourish with hereditary honors.”

– Latin proverb

“Do well and you will have no need for ancestors.”

– Voltaire

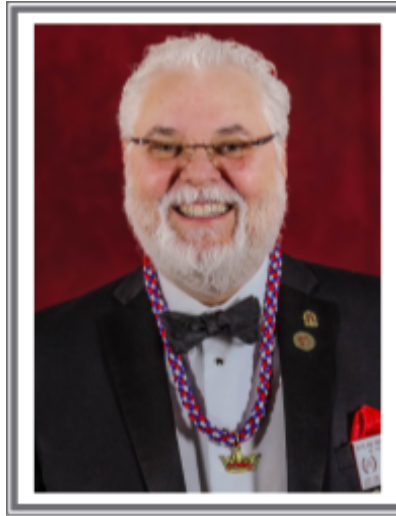
## GRAND KING'S MESSAGE

### Ho, Companions!

What is Your Reason for Being?  
Part 3.

“When you feel down, just thinking about your *ikigai* will change something in you.”

Hector Garcia (*Ikigai*, par. 2)



“What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him.”

Viktor Frankl

For anyone who has not read Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, this should be required reading. He was a Jew in Nazi concentration camps. This text from his book is poignant:

I inquired from prisoners who had been there for some time where my colleague and friend P—— had been sent.

“Was he sent to the left side?”

“Yes,” I replied. “

“Then you can see him there,” I was told.

“Where?” A hand pointed to the chimney a few hundred yards off, which was sending a column of smoke up into the grey sky of Poland. It dissolved into a sinister cloud of smoke.

“That's where your friend is, floating up to Heaven,” was the answer (Frankl, sec. I).

Despite such terrible events, Frankl was able to show that the meaning of life comes through each and every moment of living, even in suffering and death. He found inner

peace through his search for meaning. As men and as Royal Arch Masons, we are also looking for that inner peace and equanimity. This can be found through finding purpose in your life and profession, an essential component of happiness (Patrick and Brooks, Time 1.22:29). Over 100 elderly residents of Ogimi Village, Okinawa Prefecture, Japan were interviewed because they were known as a village of longevity. At the end of

the day, the surveyor found that these people had a purpose, even into their senior years of life. Specifically, they described having deep friendships, loving art and gardening. They described social links with peers and how they often got together to avoid social isolation (García and Miralles).

What word did they use to describe what they found in Ogimi village: *Ikigai*.

Another study showed that people who are over 65 years of age who work only for pay but not in pursuit of their *ikigai* have a 1.55 times greater risk of decline in functional capacity two years later. The authors concluded that “maintaining health can be enhanced by...finding meaning in life (Nemoto et al. 745).” In addition, this type of wellbeing was associated with a “36% lower risk of developing dementia during the three-year follow-up. Having *Ikigai* was associated with decreased depressive symptoms and hopelessness as well as higher happiness, and life satisfaction (Okuzono et al. 1).” For these reasons, the Japanese government has begun to show support for

social engagement of their elderly citizens (Kawamura 2). How can we fully describe *ikigai*? Let's start with this Venn diagram:



Figure 1. Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life.

What do you love? This is incredibly important, but it is also incomplete. Doing something that doesn't pay the rent isn't enough! Getting a degree in art history usually doesn't bring in enough money to take care of your family.

Now what are you good at? For me, it was medicine and, together with what I loved, it became my passion, to be a physician. The third circle in the Venn diagram is what the world needs. Adding that to what I love is my mission in life, to heal those who are broken.

If you can be paid for the work that the world needs, it is a vocation. If you can be paid for what you're good at, it becomes a profession. If you can find a way to overlap all of these, what the world needs, what you can be paid for, what you are good at and what you love, this becomes your purpose, your *ikigai*...it is "what makes life worth living (Kawamura 2)."

This work describing older individuals remains very important in our

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craft, especially with our aging population in our lodges (The Square Magazine et al.). Saying that, this isn't only for senior citizens. A recent study of young people from 21 countries showed that 36% of people between 15 and 24 often feel nervous, worried or anxious, with 19% feeling depressed (UNICEF). Much is changing when it comes to burnout, depression and even our values as a country and individually. A recent Wall Street Journal survey of adults found that patriotism, religion and community involvement were less important today than before (Zitner). One of the tenets of freemasonry, tolerance for others, has fallen over the past four years from 80% to 58%. Across generations, patriotism was very important to only 23% of adults under 30, but 59% of those over 65 years of age. 30% of us are not happy. Can we solve this with *ikigai* in our lives? In our craft? Our communities? If so, how can we use these within our chapters? In Virginia Masonry?

Let's look at that Venn diagram again.

1. Do you love your gentle craft? If you do, ask yourself why? Is it social connection? The education? Ritual? What else? Make sure you know what drives your love.

2. Is it what the world needs? This probably depends on what type of influence freemasonry has in our country, around our neighborhood, or with our family sitting across the dinner table.

3. Are you good at it? Have you put time into it to make your presentations better, your ritual better, the social interactions better? Malcolm Gladwell would tell us that it takes 10,000 hours of correct practice to be masterful at the work (Gladwell). Does that resemble the time you've invested?

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4. Finally, can you be paid for it? Most of us believe that this is financial, but payment could represent something else. When we cast our bread upon the water, it comes back to us (*Holy Bible*, Ecclesiastes 11.1). When we share our talents, they increase. There are rewards that come from service to others, which reinforces “the idea that helping others can be a vital component of their own well-being (Kawamura 3).”

The authors of the book, *Ikigai: the Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, distilled ten rules they gleaned from the Okinawan people they interviewed (García and Miralles 184–85). These are:

1. Stay active
2. Take it slow
3. Don't fill your stomach
4. Surround yourself with good friends
5. Get in shape for your next birthday
6. Smile
7. Reconnect with nature
8. Give thanks
9. Live in the moment
10. Follow your purpose in life.

Putting all of this together brings satisfaction, delight, excitement, comfort and happiness. This combines love with the needs of the world, driven by our carefully honed skills, and with something in return, for ourselves and those around us. This is our *ikigai*. This is our purpose for living. This is what we must nurture every day, so that we will bloom, and in doing so leave our “footprints on the sands of time” for others to follow (Longfellow, par. 7).

Sincerely and Fraternaly,

Joel T. Bundy, MD  
Grand King

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## Managing Stress

“There are ways we can all stay well during stress. Here are some of the most important: Experience your feelings...Talk out bad feelings...Avoid making too many changes at once...Learn how to take it easy...Turn to your friends...Exercise adequately...Decide to live. When Dr. Victor Frankl studied survivors of Nazi concentration camps to learn why they had lived while others had not, he found that the difference was in their having strong reasons for wishing to live. Perhaps what is most important in avoiding stress-related disease is to have enough reason for wanting to stay healthy.”

– Catherine Houck

“Learn not to sweat the small stuff.”

– Dr. Kenneth Greenspan

“The rule is, jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam today.”

– Lewis Carroll

## GRAND SCRIBE'S MESSAGE

### Ho, Companions!



When I was a young Royal Arch Mason going to school in Charlottesville, one of my earliest memories is watching future Grand High Priest Russell Snodgrass confer the Mark Master Degree. When he said the five Biblical scriptures regarding the keystone, I thought they all sounded alike. But as I started to understand our ritual, I realized that they came from five different places in the Bible and were said by three different people. The first is by Peter in Acts 4:11; the second is by King David in Psalm 118:22; and the third, fourth, and fifth are by Jesus in Matthew 21:42, Mark 12:10, and Luke 20:17, respectively. This is not intended just to be a history lesson, but to make a larger point. All of us at some time have felt unappreciated and perhaps rejected by those in authority. This is of course not as it should be. We all have a vital role to play in Royal Arch Masonry, one best suited for our skills and abilities. And please remember, you have it in your power to continue to increase your skills and abilities. Thomas Jefferson (and others) once famously said, "The harder I work, the luckier I get." Are you a new Companion in your Chapter? Then take a position and complete the Correspondence Course. Are you an officer? I suggest qualifying for your High Priest certificate and reading the Program for Progress. Are you a High Priest? Study the Education portal on the Grand Chapter website and become

acquainted with the history and teachings of the Royal Craft. Are you a District Deputy? Try to visit your Chapters at every stated and called communication and travel some in Virginia to support the Grand High Priest in his visits. Are you a Committee Chairman? Find out what your Committee has done before and take actions to improve its work and support the Chapters. Are you a Grand Chapter Officer?

Travel in Virginia, support the Grand High Priest, and build relationships with Companions outside your District. We are a meritocracy to a great extent; it really is what and how much you know about Royal Arch Masonry, as well as what relationships you have with others that determines your success. I firmly believe that everyone who wants to be a High Priest will achieve that goal, and pretty much everyone who shows initiative and capability will one day serve as District Deputy Grand High Priest. Whatever job you have in Masonry, learn everything you can about it, and acquire all the skills you can so that you can handle whatever Masonry asks of you. Remember that time, patience, and perseverance will accomplish all things. Do something every day to improve yourself in Masonry and become a Keystone in your Chapter!

Sincerely and Fraternaly,  
Thomas L. Varner  
Grand Scribe

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## GRAND PROVOST AND/OR COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND SERVICE MESSAGE

### LEADERSHIP CORRESPONDENCE COURSE COMPLETIONS

The following Companions have recently completed correspondence courses. The Committee on Education and Service applauds your efforts and your successful completion

Paul I. L. Ayento, Great Bridge No. 82, 3/29/2026

Samuel E. R. Moon, Mount Vernon No. 14, 4/9/2026

The correspondence course may be accessed here:

<https://virginiaroyalarch.org/education/>

### Lessons of the Overseers

The Degrees of the Royal Arch are more varied and complex than those of the Blue Lodge, and while much attention is duly given to mastering the work with precision, it is too easy to never pause to think about the sublime and important lessons which they teach. One benefit of grappling with a piece to memorize and master is that it will sink into your subconscious through constant repetition, leaving a subtle but lasting impression on your character and behavior, much like reciting the rosary or a mantra. You're necessarily led to think about why the ritual uses a particular turn of phrase, why we use one word rather than another. Patterns emerge as we try to find rules to help us remember. In addition to being aide-mémoires, they can reveal a deeper meaning.

Let's reflect on the lesson of the Overseers and the Keystone. This is the fourth time we have encountered groups of three individuals who exemplify different personality traits that form a composite of our possible ways of responding to a difficult situation. It's striking that in the Mark Master Degree, for the first time, the candidate is judged based on his work rather than his character.

As for the Keystone, its purpose is to distribute the weight of a building through the two uprights of an arch. While earlier the two columns were symbolic and ornamental, the sides of the arch have now become load-bearing. The arch, being curved, is far stronger than a square lintel would be. I remember looking up in awe at the lofty arches and flying buttresses of Notre Dame and Westminster Abbey that seemed to support the very vault of Heaven. This is a more exalted and advanced design than the rudimentary architecture we are introduced to in Craft Masonry. The Keystone is identified with its Artificer, just as we now become identified with our work. As such, he represents the Worshipful Master in the triad that constitutes the Three Lesser Lights, whose job it is to balance and harmonize the various forces that support our Spiritual Temple. Thus, when confronted with something they have not seen before, the Overseers' first instinct is to reject it. It

does not fit the Working Tools they have been taught to measure with in the preceding Degrees. They need a more lofty and sublime philosophy to appreciate its worth.

How many times have we been tempted to hastily reject ideas that are new and unfamiliar? They ultimately reject the Keystone, which proved to be the wrong decision, but there's another lesson for us here. Faced with making a decision, their first instinct was to pass the buck. How often are we tempted to shy away from conflict and be content to let others make a tough decision? How often do we, when placed in positions of authority and responsibility, overlook inadequate or shoddy work to avoid confrontation? Far easier to let someone else higher up deal with it. Lastly, when subjected to peer pressure, they, like the unworthy Craftsmen in the preceding Degree, retreat from their convictions and go along with the crowd. First, the Overseers made the right decision (to let the Keystone pass) but for the wrong reason. Then they made the wrong decision (rejecting the Keystone), again for the wrong reason.

*Judge not, that ye be not judged* (Matt. 7:1). *Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment* (John 7:24). This episode has many sublime lessons for us today as Royal Arch Masons—that we leave our mark on everything we touch. We should take pride in our work, as it is a reflection of our worth and character. That we should not reject unfamiliar ideas hastily. That we should not shirk our responsibilities onto others, pass the buck, or go along with the popular consensus to avoid confrontation. Let us be faithful Overseers of the work entrusted to our care.

Fraternally,

Christopher S. Tripp, Associate Grand Lecturer

## Tolerance

“Have I done a neighborly act: I am therefore benefited. Let this be always ready to your mind, and never stop...Men have come into the world for the sake of one another. Either instruct them, then, or bear with them...Whoever does wrong, wrongs himself; whoever does injustice, does it to himself, making himself evil.”

– Marcus Aurelius

“Everything has two handles, by one of which it ought to be carried and by the other not. If your brother wrongs you, do not lay hold of the matter by the handle of the wrong that he is doing; but rather by the other handle – that he is your brother, that you were brought up together, and then you will be laying hold of the matter by the handle by which it ought to be carried.”

– Epictetus

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## GRAND CHAPLAIN'S MESSAGE

Companions,

As we enter the month of June, I invite you to reflect on the account of the rebuilding of the Temple in the book of Ezra. When the people returned to Jerusalem, they did not find a city ready for them. They found broken stones, scattered foundations, and work that seemed far beyond their strength. Yet Scripture tells us that they “set the altar upon its bases” before anything else was restored. They began with what they could do, trusting that God would guide the rest.

There is a lesson in that for us. Many of us look at our Chapters, our families, or our own spiritual lives and see places that feel unfinished. It is easy to wait for better timing or clearer direction. But the builders of old remind us that renewal often begins with a single faithful step. We do not need perfect conditions to begin good work. We only need willing hearts.

This season invites us to think about strengthening our Chapters in that same spirit. A simple call to a Companion who has been absent, a quiet word of encouragement, or a small offer of help can be the first stones set back in place. These acts may seem modest, but they prepare the ground for greater things.

The rebuilding also teaches us about deepening our fellowship. The people did not labor alone. They shared the weight of the stones and the hope that sustained them. Fellowship grows when we make time for one another, when we listen without rushing, and when we choose patience over frustration. These habits strengthen the bonds that hold a Chapter together.

We are also reminded to renew our commitment to our teachings. The Temple was not rebuilt in a day, and our own growth does not happen all at once. The lessons of the Royal Arch call us to steadiness, humility, and integrity. When we practice these virtues in the small corners of life, we lay foundations that endure.

June offers a quieter rhythm. The pace of the world eases, and we find moments to think more clearly. I encourage each Companion to take time this month for prayer and reflection. Ask yourself what part of the Temple you are helping to rebuild. It may be your Chapter. It may be your home. It may be your own heart. Whatever the answer, begin with the stone that is nearest to your hand.

May this season strengthen your faith and deepen your commitment to the principles of Royal Arch Masonry. May your actions bring encouragement to your Companions and light to your community.

Fraternally,

RE William A. Crosscup, V  
Grand Chaplain

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## CHAPTER / COUNCIL NEWS

### Waynesboro Union No. 2 - Submitted by: Stephen L. Young, Chapter Secretary

A Festival of the Degrees as conferred in the Royal Arch Chapter is scheduled for August 29, 2026, at Lee Lodge No. 209, 1600 West Main Street, Waynesboro, VA 22980. All candidates must have been elected at a Stated Convocation of the Chapter of which they have petitioned prior to the Festival. Each Chapter must furnish Mark Sheets for their Candidates. Candidates will be required to sign the Mark Sheet registering his Mark. As now scheduled, candidates should arrive no later than 8 am.

If you have candidates for the degrees, or wish to participate on the Degree Team, please contact our High Priest, Rt. Ex. Eric D. Swortzel (edswortzel@hotmail.com), or our Secretary, Rt. Ex. Stephen L. Young (S.L.Young@comcast.net).

### Orange No. 47 - Submitted by: Larry Lloyd, Chapter Secretary

Orange RAC 47 conferred the Royal Arch Degree on Saturday, May 9, 2026, at a Called Convocation for our two candidates. This was a beautiful degree conferred by our Chapter for our candidates. Many thanks to our team and Right Excellent Christopher Tripp, Associate Grand Lecturer, who assisted Most Excellent Russ Snodgrass, Grand Lecturer. Thanks to all in attendance and for their assistance with the Degree work.



In attendance were Greg Hosaflook, Russel Snodgrass, Spencer Getz, Christopher Tripp, Larry Lloyd, Jerry Barnes, David Carl, Ed Crebbs, Ron Sturm, Garnett Taylor, Ken Wyvill Jr, Bill Holman, Rusty Johnson, and Emory Merryman, Candidates Stacey Timmons and John Winn Jr.

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# The Virginia Keystone Newsletter - June 2026

## Great Bridge No. 82 - Submitted by: Emmy J. Gamboa, High Priest

On April 17, 2026, a historic moment in local Masonic history occurred as members of the Great Bridge Royal Arch Chapter No. 82 (Virginia Beach location) stepped outside their traditional roles to confer the sublime degree of Master Mason at Naomi Lodge No. 87, Norfolk Masonic Temple, Norfolk, Virginia. This event marked the first time the Chapter has performed a Craft lodge degree, making it a truly inaugural opportunity that highlighted the intimate connection between the Royal Arch and the Blue Lodge.

The evening was filled with profound dedication, as companions of the Great Bridge Royal Arch Chapter demonstrated exceptional skill in conferring the degree upon a deserving brother of Naomi Lodge. By taking on the roles typically handled by a Lodge of Master Masons, the Chapter members displayed both their dedication to the fraternity and their proficiency in the ritual.

The members of Naomi Lodge No. 87 welcomed the collaboration, which strengthened the local Masonic fellowship. The successful conferral by the visiting Chapter members provided a unique and memorable experience for all attendees, bridging the gap between the Symbolic Lodge and Capitular Masonry in an impressive display of unity.

This milestone event sets a potential precedent for future collaboration and highlights the versatility and dedication of the members of Great Bridge Royal Arch Chapter No. 82.



Front Row: Worshipful Richard Bosley, Worshipful Paul Ian Ayento, Brother Ryan Scott Edmonds (Candidate), Worshipful Emmy Jocson Gamboa, Brother Daschel Fernandez Macayana.

Second Row: Worshipful Frederick John Cazenave II, Worshipful Frank Linwood Beard, Worshipful Larry Dale Bateman, Worshipful Dave Ray Conner, Brother Joel Antonio Matos, Worshipful Pablito Atanacio Pakingan, Brother Anthony G. Vitug, Right Worshipful Frederick Russell Dixon, Brother Mark Allan Arellano Rimando, Brother George Palmos Servidad.

Back Row: Brother Donald Henry Jillson III, Worshipful Eddie Joe Gaskins, Brother Chase Weston Brasher, Brother Cameron Allen Weber, Worshipful Aristides George Hazzis, Worshipful Cielito Arradaza Parrilla, Very Worshipful Rogelio Daya Jamero II, Brother Thomas Mason Hilder (not in photo).

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## GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

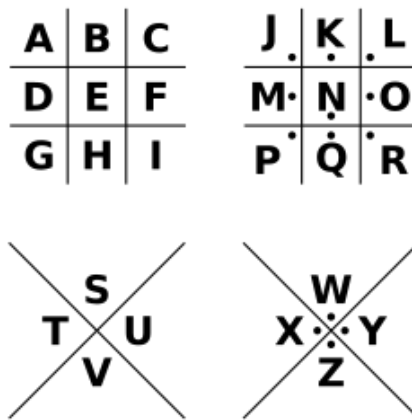
Companion Brian Walaszczyk, PHP  
Fauquier Royal Arch Chapter No. 25

### A CRYPTIC CIPHER

#### PART I

Within Freemasonry, there are many esoteric ideas expressed through the veiled symbolism within the allegories, décor, and structure of the lodge, and words of the ritual. At times, there may be multiple layers of symbolism that may be explored, unraveling like the layers of an onion. Within the Cryptic Council degree of the Royal and Select Master, or Select Master in some jurisdictions, there appears to be a peculiar cipher veiled within the ritual. However, I will proceed with one caution. The cipher which may be referred to in the ritual does not appear to be the same which is used within Freemasonry or the Royal Arch, nor can I find any documented use of the cipher within mainstream Freemasonry. However, the clues hinting to the cipher are too much to ignore and worth exploring. The cipher, which will be explored, was and still is used by Kabbalists, Rosicrucians, and ceremonial magicians.

The cipher ultimately revealed to initiates within the Royal Arch Chapter and Cryptic Council is the Pigpen cipher, which has been well documented and explained in many places, such as a Grand Lodge of Ohio article on “What is a Masonic Cipher”. The Pigpen cipher uses the English or Latin alphabet by assigning letters to different sections of a 3x3 box, with X as shown below.



To use the cipher, you select a letter and use its outline and dot, if applicable. You continue until you have finished encrypting the letters, words, or phrase of your choice. This cipher is commonly used in masonic journals and magazines. Try to decipher the following example using the above cipher:

□□> JL.L ΓV ∇ΠJ> Γ> ∇□□∇V >E U□

However, the particular cipher which appears to be veiled within the Cryptic Council degrees is to an older cipher known as the AIQ BKR or Kabbalah of Nine Chambers. This cipher was utilized by Kabbalists for religious symbolism rather than to encrypt secret messages. It may have also been a method to memorize and learn the Hebrew alphabet. In Part II of this article, we will discuss the history of this cipher.

## **GUEST CONTRIBUTOR**

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### **A More Excellent Way**

#### **Maintaining Relationships with Widows and Brethren**

In the last quarter of 2025, The More Excellent Way Program was launched by Stevenson Commandery No. 8 and Waynesboro Union No. 2. The program aims to provide greater fellowship and support for our Masonic Widows and Brethren facing challenges. Lee Lodge No. 209 immediately joined our efforts and has provided the financial support required for our success. Easter Star Chapter No. 105 has ably assisted us as we make visits to the homes of the widows. This unity among our several Masonic organizations is not uncommon in our area, but it is still most gratifying.

The phrase "more excellent way" refers to a teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:31, where the Apostle Paul emphasizes the importance of love (or charity) over spiritual gifts. This concept is further elaborated in 1 Corinthians 13, highlighting that without love, even the greatest gifts are meaningless.

#### **1 Corinthians 12:31**

"But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet show I unto you a more excellent way."

Our Most Excellent Way project began with Thanksgiving cards, invitations to our commandery Christmas Observance, creation of a "Help - Aid - Assist Hotline" publicized by refrigerator magnets, delivery of Christmas poinsettias, occasional in-home visits to each of the nearly thirty widows/brethren on our list, and additional greeting cards for other holidays.

Excellent JD Davis, High Priest of Luray No. 4 and member of Waynesboro Union No. 2 and Stevenson Commandery No. 8, provides "1000 words worth" about the program with a picture below of his visit to Lynn Jackson, far more descriptive than my words. JD made personal visits to

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the three widows he is matched with, delivering to each an Easter card, a cross lapel pin (provided by the committee to all widows), plus flowers he bought himself.



The personal connection evident in this picture is the program's goal. We start with a basic framework of guidance, greeting cards about once a month, and a small gift from the committee a few times a year. From this small beginning, the advocate makes a personal connection and develops a supportive relationship with the widow or home-bound brother. A level of comfort and trust is established. The widow / home-bound brother is "seen" and "heard", and the bond of friendship and brotherly love is strengthened. “Good Work, Square Work” to Companion JD, and to all Companions who volunteer as friends and advocates for our widows and brethren.

## Travel

“On my first trip abroad, years ago, a wise Englishman gave me a few rules, to my life-long profit. “In a foreign restaurant,” he said, “never ask for a dish which you can get anywhere at home.: What’s the use of travel if you avoid new experiences? Learn the cuisine of the country. Wherever you eat, ask for the spécialité de la maison, the dish on which the restaurant prides itself. In fact, when you’re in a new land never order the meal, least of all the wine; ask the waiter what he would recommend. Such a request is a great compliment, as from one connoisseur to another.”

– John Erskine

“Never eat Chinese food in Oklahoma.”

– Bryan Miller