



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

The Keystone

August 2026 Vol. 10 No. 5

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P.O. Box 2276
Portsmouth, Virginia 23702

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

Ho, Companions!

Finish Strong... Keep the Momentum

Companions,

As I sit down to write this article (during an extended layover from a delayed flight), it is hard to believe that we are entering the final quarter of our Capitular year. It seems like only yesterday we gathered with excitement and anticipation as this journey began. Since then, I have been blessed with the privilege of traveling across our great Commonwealth, visiting Chapters from one end of Virginia to the other, sharing fellowship, witnessing exceptional ritual, and experiencing firsthand the unwavering spirit that makes Virginia Royal Arch Masonry so special.

Every Chapter has its own traditions, personality, and unique challenges, yet one thing has remained remarkably consistent throughout the Commonwealth: the dedication of our Companions. Whether serving as officers, mentoring new members, preparing meals, opening the Chapter room, or quietly accomplishing the countless tasks that often go unnoticed, you continue to prove that our great Fraternity is built not upon titles or offices, but upon faithful service.

One of the defining moments of this Capitular year was undoubtedly our Statewide Festival in June, where more than fifty worthy Master Masons completed their journey and were exalted as Royal Arch Masons. That success



did not happen by accident. It was the result of months of planning, rehearsals, phone calls, petitions, degree work, and countless acts of quiet service performed by Companions who believed that the future of Capitular Masonry was worth their time and effort.

While the Exaltation of those new Companions was the highlight of the day, the Festival itself became a powerful reminder of what can happen when we work together with a common purpose. It was never about one event; it was about investing in the future of Virginia Capitular Masonry. In this issue, I am pleased to recognize the many Companions whose extraordinary efforts helped make that day such a tremendous success. Their dedication deserves our heartfelt appreciation. I would like to thank our Grand Master, Most Worshipful and Right Excellent Matthew T. Szramoski for his support of the York Rite in general and this Grand Chapter in particular – he gave our Companions the Charge of each degree and presided as King for the Royal Arch Degree; our Grand Lecturer Most Excellent Russell G. Snodgrass and his team of Committee on Work members, and all cast members of the various degree teams; and Excellent Allen Watts, the Companions of Richmond-Washington No. 3-9, ladies of Ruth Chapter No. 8, OES, and everyone who assisted in the preparation, execution, and clean-up of the Festival; my team this year, the Keystones, and most of all YOU, the

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Companions of the Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons in Virginia!

This year, our theme, "**Son of Man... Mark Well**," has challenged us daily. As I look back on the months behind us, I have come to appreciate that perhaps the most important things we are called to mark well are not simply the accomplishments we celebrate, but the people who make those accomplishments possible. The Festival succeeded because Companions invested in other men. Our Chapters continue to flourish because faithful servants quietly labor behind the scenes with little expectation of recognition. Our future will never be determined by programs alone; it will be shaped by the relationships we build, the Brothers we mentor, and the lives we influence. Those are the things truly worth marking well.

One of the greatest blessings of serving as your Grand High Priest has been witnessing the extraordinary dedication of your Grand Chapter Officers. Their countless hours of travel, their willingness to serve, and their unwavering commitment to Virginia Royal Arch Masonry have been inspiring. They have represented this Grand Jurisdiction with distinction while supporting our Chapters in ways both visible and unseen. I could not be more grateful for their friendship, counsel, and faithful service.

As encouraging as these accomplishments have been, I would offer one word of caution.

Don't lose the momentum.

Momentum is difficult to create but remarkably easy to lose. We have seen renewed excitement across the Commonwealth. We have welcomed new Companions into our Chapters. We have

strengthened friendships, shared fellowship, and demonstrated that Virginia Royal Arch Masonry is alive, healthy, and moving forward.

Now is not the time to coast toward the end of the Capitular year and our Grand Annual Convocation.

Now is the time to build upon what we have started.

Earlier this year, I challenged our Chapters to embrace the **Three Rs—Recruit, Retain, and Re-Engage**. Although each Official Visit has featured a different message and a different lesson, those three words have remained a constant thread woven throughout the year. That has been intentional. They are not simply a slogan; they continue to provide a practical roadmap for strengthening our Chapters and securing the future of Virginia Royal Arch Masonry.

Along the way, we've also talked about another trio of guiding principles—**Visibility, Viability, and Versatility**. These remind us that Royal Arch Masonry must remain visible in our communities, viable within our Chapters, and versatile enough to meet the needs of today's Companions while remaining faithful to the timeless principles that define our Craft.

Perhaps Schoolhouse Rock was right; **three really is a magic number**. Masonry certainly seems to think so. From the earliest lessons we receive as Masons, groups of three have represented completeness, balance, and progress. So, I hope you'll indulge me just one more set.

As we enter the closing months of this Capitular year, allow me to offer three more

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Rs. Not to replace the first three, and certainly not to overshadow the Three Vs, but to help us finish this year with purpose, enthusiasm, and momentum.

Re-Focus

The excitement of beginning a Capitular year is easy. The true measure of leadership is how we finish it.

As our calendars become busier, elections and installations in our subordinate Chapters and our Grand Annual Convocation all draw nearer, let us remain focused on our purpose. There are still worthy Master Masons waiting for an invitation. There are still inactive Companions who deserve a phone call. There are still opportunities to improve our ritual, strengthen our Chapters, and deepen the friendships that make our Fraternity unique. The finish line may be in sight, but there is still meaningful work to accomplish.

Re-Energize

Enthusiasm is contagious.

Every Companion has the ability to inspire another. Invite someone to accompany you to Chapter. Encourage a new officer (or perhaps take that step yourself). Attend a neighboring Chapter's meeting. Mentor one of our newest Companions. Share why Royal Arch Masonry continues to be meaningful in your life. Sometimes all it takes is one enthusiastic Companion to reignite an entire Chapter.

Let's ensure that the momentum created by our Statewide Festival carries into every stated convocation, every degree, every district meeting, and every Chapter across Virginia.

Raise the Bar

Good should never become good enough. Let us raise the bar in our ritual so every degree is worthy of the candidates who experience it.

Let us raise the bar in our leadership by preparing the next generation of officers today.

Let us raise the bar in officer education, mentorship, and succession planning so our Chapters continue to thrive for generations to come.

Let us raise the bar by inviting worthy Master Masons to complete their Masonic journey and by ensuring they become active, engaged Companions for years to come.

Let us raise the bar in our philanthropy. During these remaining months, I encourage every Companion and every Chapter to support our upcoming Alzheimer's Walks, continue contributing to the MAHOVA REB Memory Unit, participate in the upcoming Grand Chapter Golf Tournament, and support the many charitable efforts taking place throughout our Grand Jurisdiction. These causes remind our communities that the lessons we learn in our Chapter rooms are demonstrated through lives of service.

Most importantly, let us raise the bar for ourselves. Every one of us has the opportunity, and the responsibility, to leave our Royal Craft stronger than we found it.

Companions, I am deeply grateful for the kindness you have shown me throughout this year and for the hospitality extended during every Official Visit. Looking back over these past months, I am filled with optimism for the future of Royal Arch Masonry in Virginia. I have witnessed dedicated leadership, renewed

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enthusiasm, genuine fellowship, and an unwavering commitment to our Capitular principles. Those experiences have strengthened my belief that our best days are not behind us, they are still ahead of us!

In closing, as I reflect on this remarkable year, I'm reminded that our York Rite themes have been telling one story all along. We are called to ***Live Our Obligations*** through faithful service. In doing so, we strengthen ***The Legacy We Share*** for those who follow us. And when we pause to recognize both the blessings we've received and the responsibilities we've accepted, we truly ***Mark Well*** what matters most, the opportunities God has placed before us.

The words "**Son of Man... Mark Well**" have guided us throughout this Capitular year. As we approach its conclusion, perhaps the greatest thing we can mark well is not simply how far we have come, but how much opportunity still lies before us.

Let us continue to **Recruit, Retain, and Re-Engage**.

Let us remain committed to **Visibility, Viability, and Versatility**.

And as we cross the finish line together, let us **Re-Focus, Re-Energize, and Raise the Bar**.

If we do those things together, I have no doubt that when we gather at our Grand Annual Convocation this November, we will not simply celebrate another successful year, we will celebrate stronger Chapters, stronger Companions, stronger leaders, and an even brighter future for Royal Arch Masonry in Virginia.

So, Companions...

Finish strong.

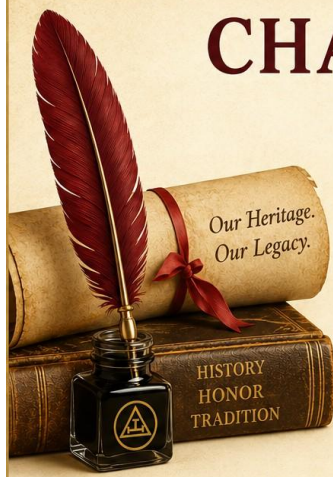
Keep the momentum.

Mark well the Blessings of God and the service we are called to perform.

For many are called, but few chosen.

Fraternally,

Kyle W. Strickland
Grand High Priest
Royal Arch Masons of Virginia



CHAPTER HISTORY MATTERS!

Our Heritage.
Our Legacy.

Every Chapter has a story worth telling and preserving for future generations.

We are collecting written histories from *all* Royal Arch Chapters in Virginia.

Please share your Chapter's history, milestones, and memories.



SEND YOUR CHAPTER HISTORY TO:

 Rt. Ex. Ben Hill
Grand Historian –
Grand Chapter of Virginia

 ben.hill.suffolk@outlook.com



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GRAND KING'S MESSAGE

Ho, Companions!

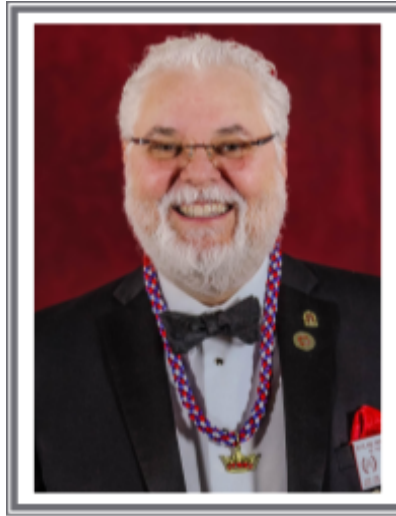
The Telephone Tree Game

...“It is the peculiar and perpetual error of the human understanding to be more moved and excited by affirmatives than negatives” ...

Frances Bacon (Bacon 24)

“If you don’t understand it fully, don’t speak on it. Too many people have full opinions with half facts.”

Attributed to Tony A. Gaskins, Jr.



Everywhere it is the same story, whether at work in the hospital, with family, or even within our gentle craft. A story heard by one person and passed along to another can distort a reputation, as the telephone tree game we all know demonstrates. My point is simple: when words travel without firsthand knowledge, the result can be unfair and deeply damaging. It is more devastating than having “I’m going to the park to fly a kite,” turn into “I’m going to the moon to fight a knight.” Relationships are broken, friends become disillusioned, and choices made under complex circumstances become a reference about integrity.

Many of us recall the credo of Robert Fulghum, who wrote that “All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten (Fulghum).” He then added that “Wisdom was there in the sandpile at Sunday School.” To this thought, I recall fondly singing this traditional song in Sunday School, “O Be Careful, Little Eyes (*O Be Careful*),” and in particular the verse that

told us to be careful little *tongue* what you say!

In 1985, a social scientist, Dr. Thomas Gilovich, at Cornell University asked about the impact of gossip and how it might influence those who received secondhand information rather than witnessing something firsthand. He noted that “many of our impressions of other people are based entirely on secondhand

information (Gilovich, *Secondhand Information* 59).” His hypothesis was that those who heard a story secondhand formed a more negative opinion of someone who had committed a “bad deed” than those who had firsthand information.

He set up the experiment like this: Those with firsthand information (first-generation observers) watched a videotape of a target person describing past bad things he or she had done, and based on that, completed ratings of the person’s traits and their responsibility for those actions. That person then recorded a videotape of what they had seen, which was viewed by a second person (the second-generation observer), who then completed the same rating scale as the first person. What were the scenarios? There were several, including when a male abruptly terminated his relationship with his girlfriend, or when a female betrayed her friend’s confidence, or failed to help her aunt in a moment of need (Gilovich, *Secondhand Information* 62).

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He found that second-generation subjects formed more negative impressions of the target individual. Whereas the first-generation observer may have understood the nuances of the circumstances and how that may have influenced behavior, that was lost on the second person, who blamed the bad deeds on individual character flaws. This may be in part because the person passing along the information tended to keep the conversation brief and relevant, even emphasizing certain behaviors while deleting others. Hearing these stories, one must decide whether this is part of the person's personality or a result of the circumstances and situation in which it took place. This helps explain how a story can shift as it is passed along.

Keep in mind that this was a controlled experiment, whereas Gilovich states that "in the real world, people often take liberties with the truth and transmit deliberately exaggerated accounts of another person's actions in order to convey a more interesting story and be perceived as a more compelling person (Gilovich, *Secondhand Information* 70)." The takeaway is clear: we should be cautious about what we hear and believe from any and all second-hand accounts, even from reliable sources, because in real life the telephone game can distort judgment and fairness.

Does this mean that people who tell stories are doing so out of a mean spirit, or to cause harm to others? Not necessarily. To understand why stories change, let's consider how memory serves us (or not), how emotional details color our stories, and how our own biases come to bear.

Dr. Donna Bridge was the lead author of a paper published in the Department of Medical Social Sciences at Northwestern University (Bridge and Paller). She analyzed recall accuracy while simultaneously recording brain activity with electroencephalograms. The study aimed to measure memory distortion over time. What she found was that a memory of a specific event *can* change over time, and each time you recall that memory, it may be altered to align with the last recollection of that event, rather than the original event. She goes on to say that, "your memory of an event can grow less precise even to the point of being totally false with each retrieval (Paul, par. 3)." Why does this happen? It is because "human memories are always adapting. Memories are not static. If you remember something in the context of a new environment and time, or if you are even in a different mood, your memories might integrate the new information (Paul, pars. 10-11)."

Another study, this one from the University of California, Berkeley, examined biases in language use when hearing information and then passing it on (Meylan et al.). The authors compared this to the aforementioned telephone game, in which individuals hear data and infer the likely message based on the input, noise, their underlying expectations, context, and knowledge of likely words. What they found was that individuals will fill in the gaps in what they hear with their own biases.

Finally, Dr. Fritz Breithaupt and colleagues at Indiana University studied emotions in storytelling and compared that to the telling of the actual facts in the story. The facts being essentially the who, what, when, where, and

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why. Again, this was modeled on the telephone game, with a story retold three times down a line of participants. The stories contained facts, but also surprises. By the third telling of the story, “only 25% of stories’ original factual details were present”, but surprisingness remained very stable across all retellings of the story (Breithaupt et al. 11). They found that in 30.7% of cases, “the event disappeared entirely or was radically transformed by the stage of the third-iteration retelling while the overall surprise level was modestly preserved (Breithaupt et al. 12).” What this means is that even with truthful retelling, some individuals may consider their stories accurate, despite being independent of facts, if they preserve the emotional content of the story (Breithaupt et al. 13).

Where does this leave us, then? My thoughts are simple: judge others less, and give grace and kindness to each other, because careless retelling can harm reputations and relationships. Be careful what you say and the consequences of sharing with others, especially knowing that our memories are impacted by emotions and time. Keep in mind our own internal telephone game, and that

each time we recollect a story from our past, it may not exactly resemble the event we are recalling. Know that our words can have detrimental effects on others. Whether it is you on the giving or receiving end, remember the wisdom of Maya Angelou, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

For those who wish to deep dive into this topic further, I refer you to Dr. Gilovich’s book, *How We Know What Isn’t So: The Fallibility of Human Reason in Everyday Life* (Gilovich, *How We Know*).

Fraternally, with love, and every good wish,

Joel

Joel T. Bundy, MD
Grand King

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SAVE THE DATE!

GRAND CHAPTER ROYAL ARCH MASONS IN VIRGINIA

HENRY STRICKLAND & BILLY MUTTER

CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT

Benefiting the

alzheimer's association®

Southeastern Virginia Chapter



 THURSDAY
OCTOBER 1,
2026

 SLEEPY HOLE
GOLF COURSE
SUFFOLK, VIRGINIA

 4-MAN
CAPTAIN'S CHOICE
\$440 PER TEAM
18 HOLES

Join Companions, friends, and supporters from across Virginia for a day of fellowship, friendly competition, and charity in support of a cause that matters.

 TOGETHER, WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST ALZHEIMER'S.

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GRAND SCRIBE'S MESSAGE

Ho, Companions!

Do you know what an “elevator speech” is? If you were at a hotel hosting a Masonic gathering, standing there in all your fine Masonic regalia, and someone stopped you and asked who all the dressed-up men were, what would you say? If they then asked what Freemasonry is about, do you have a short and concise explanation of the Craft you can give them? When someone asks me what Freemasonry is, I tell them that we are an organization dedicated to the traditional American values of love of God, love of country, and love of family. Are we a fraternal organization? Yes, but we are much more than that. Do we teach leadership and develop leaders? Yes, but that is not our primary purpose, any more than is doing community service, of which we do plenty. Our primary purpose comes from our ritual, which provides instructions on what kind of upstanding men we should be and what kind of exemplary lives we should lead. Do you remember the thrill you felt as an Entered Apprentice when the Master proclaimed you to be a just and upright Mason? Are we being the kind of men of whom the Craft and our nation can be proud? Each of us should conduct ourselves in such a way that someone can point to us and say, “That’s what Freemasonry is all about”. Our Grand Master’s theme this year is “Living Our Obligations,” and his point is that we should be the kind of men that inspire others to be like us.



Do we fall short sometimes? Yes, and when we do so, we should resolve to improve and make each other better. Our obligations are real, and together with the five points of fellowship, provide many opportunities to help each other. Do you see a brother who needs encouragement or assistance? Do you see a brother who is heading in the wrong direction? Our obligations provide the means to help with those concerns and to treat each other the way we would like to be treated. We should also remember that our obligations have a strong spiritual basis. Are you relying on the word of God to direct you? When we speak of the Bible as “the rule and guide of our faith” and our “spiritual, moral, and Masonic trestleboard”, we are proclaiming that it is the very foundation on which all of Freemasonry and its values rest. In closing, to paraphrase the DeMolay ritual, “The world respects most of all the man who has strong religious convictions and who has the courage of a high moral standard based on a profound acknowledgment of the fact that from God all earthly blessings flow. I enjoin you to delight in the companionship of the devout, not only to frequent the holy places of worship but to carry their teachings into your daily lives.” Brethren, go and do likewise!

Sincerely and Fraternally,
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

No completions to report at this time

The correspondence course may be accessed here:

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

Lessons from “Words of the Principal Sojourner” and “Plato’s Cave”

Today’s society is a complex, hyper-connected, post-industrial, global community. Our community is characterized by distinct and often conflicting pillars. Society operates at the intersection of remarkable technological innovation, digital interconnectivity, and evolving cultural values while navigating blunt inequalities (Elsevier, n.d.). Human behavior is deeply shaped by immediate access to information and constant digital interaction. This global network fosters unprecedented collaboration. However, this global network paradoxically breeds an epidemic of isolation. (Senge, n.d.).

Humanity often trades deep, in-person empathy for superficial, fast-paced digital validation. This lack of in-person empathy fuels social isolation and loneliness, with profound, wide-ranging implications for humanity’s health and society. In-person empathy is the ability to sense, understand, and share another person's feelings through direct physical interaction. In theory, in-person empathy is easier than in practice (Calm, n.d.). The *Royal Arch Ritual* contains 41 words that provide a perfect map for Royal Arch Masons to follow.

The *Royal Arch Ritual*’s 41 words are associated with the *Principal Sojourner*, providing us with a framework to assist our fellow men. The individual does not have to be blind to be blind. Digital technology, such as social media, could make individuals completely blind to their lives and surroundings. These individuals live only through social media and digital technology. Digital technology has fundamentally reshaped human interactions by replacing in-person communication with digital communication, leading to shallower emotional connections, increased loneliness, and altered social development (National Health, 2024). We constantly witness humanity engrossed in digital media, yet feeling completely lost when they lack the automated connectivity that digital technology offers.

Stirring individuals onto a path they do not know is a figurative expression meaning to disrupt, challenge, or guide someone on an unfamiliar, misguided, or unaware journey in life. Individuals often overlook their own subtle boundary-crossing behaviors because friends and colleagues are

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"too nice" to be honest and instead prefer to give the benefit of the doubt. We can be the safe, supportive anchor who offers constructive, kind feedback that helps individuals see their blind spots. Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* is a clear example of bringing darkness into light. This allegory describes prisoners chained in a cave, seeing only shadows on the wall as their reality (Philosoph, n.d.). These solitary shadows represent the world of appearances. A freed prisoner's painful journey out of the cave into the sunlight symbolizes education. His ascent to the truth reveals the shadows as mere illusions.

Plato's *Allegory of the Cave* illustrates the difference between ignorance and enlightenment and the nature of reality. Bringing someone from darkness into light is a transformative act of empathy and support. This action involves helping individuals move through struggles such as depression, trauma, or isolation toward clarity, hope, and emotional well-being (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). That is the lesson the *Royal Arch Ritual's* 41 words provide us with as Royal Arch Masons to follow. As Royal Arch Masons, we must be the catalyst that brings humanity into a world of clarity and enlightenment.

"For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." 2 Corinthians 4:6

Fraternally,

Joseph Gadea, PDDGHP
Grand Principal Sojourner

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GRAND CHAPLAIN'S MESSAGE

Companions,

There is a particular kind of heavy quiet that settles over Virginia in August. The cicadas begin their song long before the morning coffee has cooled, the midday heat rises off the pavement in waves, and every living thing seems to seek whatever shade it can find. It is a season that forces us to slow down, whether we intend to or not.

Heat like this has a way of stripping away pretense. When the days grow long and muggy, patience wears thin far quicker than on a crisp autumn morning. Yet it is precisely in these uncomfortable moments that our inner character reveals itself. It takes very little effort to display good humor when conditions are pleasant. The true test of our brotherhood comes when we are tired, hot, and tempted to retreat into our own comfortable isolation.

Scripture reminds us through the prophet Ezekiel, in the charge shared by our Most Excellent Grand High Priest this year: *"Son of Man, Mark Well."*

To mark well is to pay close attention. It means noticing what is easy to overlook. In the height of summer, when our convocations often slow down and the lodge rooms grow quiet, it is easy to let our duty to one another drift. But a companion who cannot leave his home feels the weight of solitude whether it is ninety degrees outside or thirty. A younger Mason still finding his footing in the Royal Arch needs a steady word of encouragement just as much in August as he does in January. Fraternal care is not seasonal, nor does it pause for the weather.

As we navigate these final weeks of summer, take a quiet moment to reflect on the companions who walk this road with you. Consider reaching out to just one brother you have not spoken with in recent months. A brief phone call, a short porch visit, or a simple note in the mail costs very little, but it carries the cool refreshment of genuine brotherly concern.

A Prayer for the Season

Heavenly Father, grant us patience when the days are long and weary. Teach us to mark well the needs of our companions, especially those who feel set aside in the quiet seasons of life. Keep our hearts attentive and our hands ready to serve, in every season and in every kind of weather. Amen.

Fraternally,

RE William A. Crosscup, V
Grand Chaplain

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CHAPTER / COUNCIL NEWS

District No. 15 - Submitted by: Rt. Ex. Dennis G. Parmeter, DDGP

CAPITULAR/CRYPIC CHAPTERS OF DISTRICT NO. 15 ***3RD ANNUAL TABLE CHAPTER ANNOUNCEMENT***

I am pleased to announce the 3rd Annual Table Chapter to be held on Saturday October 24th at 4pm. Location: Cave Ridge Winery, 1476 Conicville Rd, Mt Jackson, VA 22842 (the new indoor event center). The Table Chapter is open to all Masons and their Ladies, and we ask that the Companions wear their Red Jackets or (red polo shirts) while the Ladies wear their Sunday finest outfits. The MC of this event will be Rt. Ex. Dennis Haas, who is very entertaining and the music provided by Ex. Companion J.D. Davis MEHP Luray RAC No. 4. The Chapters in the 15th District are being asked to invite the Master or Senior Warden of the Symbolic Blue Lodges within their vicinity to attend the Table Chapter as their guest and learn what Royal Arch Masonry is all about. This will be the primary fund raiser for the District, and as such the price per ticket is \$50.00 per person. A maximum of 85 attendees can be accommodated. Dinner consisting of Corned Beef, potatoes, carrots, and cabbage with dessert and coffee/cold drink will be served. Complimentary shot glasses will be provided. The wine being served is some of the finest in the Commonwealth.

I have appointed Rt. Ex. Alan Spear, MEHP of Shenandoah RAC No. 17 Chairman of this event. Please send a check to: Alan K. Spear at P.O. Box 6, Mount Jackson, Va. 22842 and make the Check out to Shenandoah RAC No. 17. Please direct any questions to him at Spearak@hotmail.com.

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).

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E. H. Gill No. 50 - Submitted by: Right Excellent Joseph M. Matthews, Associate Grand Provost

On Monday, July 20, E.H. Gill Royal Arch Chapter No. 50 conferred the Mark Master and Past Master Degrees on five candidates. Members of Pearisburg Chapter No. 29, Castlewood Chapter No. 34, Taylor Chapter No. 70, and Barrett Chapter No. 76 were also present to assist in the conferral of the Degrees.

Ex. Ben Blackburn, High Priest of Taylor Chapter No. 70, conferred the Mark Master Degree. Rt. Ex. Lyle Hartsock, District Deputy Grand High Priest for the 10th Capitular District, conferred the Past Master Degree. Both Companions performed their roles in a distinct and impressive manner.



The candidates were: J. Tyler Byrd, M. Adam Casto, C. Todd Garrett, Jake A. Elkins and Bradley A. Powers. Companions present were: Ed Bush, Brian Lytle, Ben Blackburn, Tommy Steffey, Danny Bentley, Mike Jones, Brad Fleming, Mike Thomas, Clifton Mullins, Chris Rakes, and Bob Bruce. Also in attendance from the Grand Chapter were: Mt. Ex. Joe G. Broce, Sr., Past Grand High Priest (2018); Rt. Ex. D. Cole David, Grand Master of the Second Veil; Rt. Ex. Joseph M. Matthews, Associate Grand Provost; and Lyle W. Hartsock, District Deputy Grand High Priest - 10th District.

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Urbanna No. 59 - Submitted by: Ben Sanders, High Priest

Happy Independence Day from Urbanna Royal Arch Chapter No. 59!

Today, I had the honor of representing Urbanna Royal Arch Chapter No. 59 along with George Francisco from Warwick Royal Arch Chapter #80 in the Yorktown Fourth of July Parade by marching alongside my Brothers of the Grand Lodge of Virginia, A.F. & A.M.

As Royal Arch Masons, we are proud to stand with our Masonic family in celebrating the birth of our nation and the freedoms we enjoy. On this 250th anniversary of American Independence, it was especially meaningful to take part in honoring the principles of liberty, patriotism, and service that have united generations of Americans.



In Loving Memory

Excellent Companion Tom Lewis of Fredericksburg Royal Arch Chapter No. 23 laid down his working tools on Friday, July 24, 2026. He was exalted as a Royal Arch Mason on June 5, 1999. He served as High Priest of Fredericksburg Royal Arch Chapter and continued to be a mentor to younger companions. He was one of the finest ritualists in the chapter, a recent recipient of the Ish Sodi award, and was serving as Scribe when he passed. His presence will be missed by all who had the pleasure of knowing him. We have no further details at present, but the Chapter Secretary can be contacted at secretary@va-rac23.org for anyone wanting to know about funeral arrangements.

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GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

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

A CRYPTIC CIPHER

PART II

In addition to being a cipher, AIQ BKR is a letter substitution method known as temura. With temura, you rotate the letters within a triad of letters to create a new word. However, it has been difficult to find specific examples of either method.

The AIQ BKR cipher is based on Hebrew letters and their associated gematria value. Gematria is a system that assigns a numerical value to each letter. For example, Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet is assigned the value of one, Bet two, Gimel three, and so on. The AIQ BKR also includes the five Hebrew letter finals or sofits and their numerical values from 500 to 900, totaling 27 letters. To use the AIQ BKR system one arranges the letters, along with their finals into a 3x3 square with nine boxes. It places three letters in each square by organizing them by the first digit of their gematria value. For example, letters with 1, 10, and 100; 2, 20, and 200; and so on. Its name, AIQ BKR comes from the first two boxes, read from right to left, which is how Hebrew is read. It is known as the Kabbalah of the Nine Chambers due to it containing nine boxes and its association with Kabbalah. Similar to the Pig Pen cipher, to encrypt a word, you take the shape of the box surrounding the letter to be encrypted. This may be further developed by merging the shapes into a symbol, character, or hieroglyph.

Although allegedly used prior, this system was first described by Cornelius Agrippa in his Three Books of Occult Philosophy where he writes:

“There is moreover another fashion amongst the Cabalists, formerly had in great esteem, but now it is so common, that it is placed amongst profane things, and it is this. The twenty seven Characters of the Hebrews may be divided into three Classes, whereof every one contains nine letters. The first, viz. א ב ג ד ה ו ז ח ט which are the seals or marks of simple numbers, and of intellectual things, distributed into nine orders of Angels. The second hath י כ ל מ נ ס ע פ צ the marks of tens, and of Celestial things, in the nine Orbs of the heavens. The third hath the other four letters, with the five final, by order, viz. ק ר ש ת ם ן ף ץ which are marks of hundreds, and inferior things, viz. four simple Elements, and of five kinds of perfect compounds. They do now and then distribute these three Classes into nine Chambers, whereof the first is of

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unites [unities], viz. intellectual, celestial and elemental: The second is of Twos. The third of Threes, and so of the rest: These Chambers are framed by the intersection of four parallel lines, intersecting themselves into right angles, as is expressed in this following figure.

ש	ל	ג	ב	ב	ר	ק	י	א
ס	ו	ס	ז	נ	ז	ח	ט	ח
ז	ע	ז	ח	פ	ח	ט	צ	ז

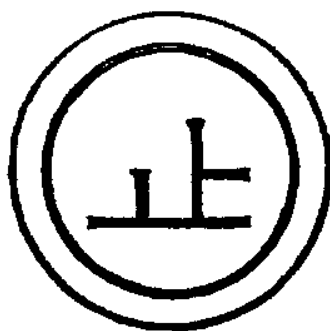
Out of which being dissected into parts, proceed nine particular figures, viz.

⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋

Which then are contracted to three figures, after this manner.

⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋ ⌋

Which then are contracted into one, yet the points Notariacon are wont to be omitted, and then there comes forth such a Character of Michael."



So, as we can see, the cipher can be used to deduce a word, such as the name of an angel into a symbol or character. These symbols have been used as talismans in different Western Esoteric systems such as the Arbatel: Of the Magic of the Ancients, a Latin Grimoire of ceremonial magic published in 1575, and by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

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It is interesting that the Royal Arch Symbol, the Triple Tau as seen below, looks peculiarly like a character which could have been created using the cipher.



However, the more common explanation is that it is derived from a T over an H meaning Templum Hierosolyma, the Temple of Jerusalem, or Clavis ad Thesaurum, the Key to the Mysteries, among others. I have found no evidence that the symbol was created using the AIQ BKR, but the similarity is intriguing; perhaps it is a key to the mysteries. However, in PART III of this article, we will learn why the AIQ BKR may be veiled within the Royal and Select Master degree.

Tall Cedars - Supporting Medical Research Companion Ed Tooma, PHP Shenandoah No. 17

How many of you remember the days of the Muscular Dystrophy Association telethon hosted by comedian and actor Jerry Lewis? One of the main features of the show was the Singing Cedars, a musical group within The Tall Cedars of Lebanon, a Masonic appendant body. The group appeared regularly at the annual fundraiser for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. They were known for songs like "Everything 's Coming Up Roses," and "With A Song In My Heart." Jerry Lewis frequently conducted the group, adding a touch of his slapstick humor. Back in the year 1969.

The Singing Cedars recorded an album titled "Melody of Christmas." All profits were donated to the Tall Cedars of Lebanon medical research fund. The Tall Cedars have long partnered with the MDA, providing donations to the Jerry Lewis Foundation and supporting the annual Telethon, which raised over \$2.45 billion between 1966 and 2010. The Singing Cedars Chorus of Lebanon, PA, continues to perform, supporting the Tall Cedars Foundation. The Tall Cedars of Lebanon International is a side degree of Freemasonry in certain Grand Jurisdictions, open to Master Masons in good standing in a regular Masonic lodge. Its motto is "Fun, Frolic, & Fellowship." Its members are distinguished by the pyramid-shaped hats they wear at their functions. The name is derived from the cedars of Lebanon that King Solomon used to build his temple. The Tall Cedars of Lebanon of North America Supreme Forest (headquarters) is located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

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GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Companion Joey S. Martin, Grand Royal Arch Captain

Our amazing nation celebrated its 250th anniversary on July 4th, 2026. On this day, we celebrate our growth and the changes we have seen over the past 25 decades. With the arrival of our nation's birthday, Salem, VA, has welcomed the Salem fair for many years. The brethren of Taylor Lodge 23, with the assistance of many companions from DC Shanks Royal Arch Chapter 31, take part in their annual fundraising lovingly called "the parking project". This annual event began in 2002 by Worshipful David Kidd to raise money for distributing scholarships to the community and to tackle lodge projects. The large grass fields of Taylor Lodge allow the brethren and companions to sweat and toil in the summer heat- and oftentimes in the rain- for this very worthwhile cause.



This year, we had two new visitors with us: two pop-up Promise Gardens from the Roanoke Walk to End Alzheimer's Association. Thousands of visitors, plus a large quantity of vehicle traffic, were able to see and talk about these two very special visitors. I was able to catch the High Priest of DC Shanks, Skye Blackwell (on the right), and soon-to-be Right Excellent Jerry Martin (on the left), observing the pop-up gardens in the picture shown here.



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With permission from Worshipful Kyle Campbell, District 8 Royal Arch Masons displayed these pop-up gardens, which were distributed by Nicole Miracle and the Roanoke Walk to End Alzheimer's team. Our goal was to spread the word and start conversations about the upcoming walk. Although the walk will not take place until November 14th at the River's Edge North complex, it is never too early to raise awareness for this important event. Sharing the information early also gives everyone plenty of time for teams to form and plan ahead with a confirmed date and location in mind.

These walks are held across our great country to aid in helping raise funds for research and development in the battle against this debilitating disease. I had the opportunity to chat with my fellow team members at a recent Roanoke Walk to End Alzheimer's board meeting about the exciting advancements in treatments and amazing medical breakthroughs. Nicole Hicks, senior walk manager for the Alzheimer's Association Central and Western Virginia, and Brooke Gill, whom I call our education guru, shared these advancements, made just this year, with me.

1. Blood tests are changing how Alzheimer's is diagnosed.

Highly accurate blood biomarker tests are making it easier to detect Alzheimer's disease earlier and determine who may benefit from treatment. These tests have the potential to expand access to diagnosis beyond specialized memory clinics.

2. Disease-modifying treatments are now part of clinical care.

Rather than only treating symptoms, FDA-approved anti-amyloid therapies can slow cognitive decline in people with early Alzheimer's disease by targeting one of the underlying causes of the disease.

3. Earlier diagnosis is becoming possible.

Advances in biomarker research allow Alzheimer's to be identified years before symptoms become severe, giving individuals and families more time to plan, participate in research, and consider treatment options.

4. Research is expanding beyond amyloid.

Scientists are now studying tau protein, inflammation, immune function, vascular health, metabolism, and genetics, creating a broader understanding of Alzheimer's and opening new pathways for treatment.

5. The treatment pipeline is stronger than ever.

More than **150 potential therapies** are currently in clinical trials, including medications, vaccines, gene therapies, and combination treatments designed to slow, prevent, or even delay Alzheimer's disease.

6. Precision medicine is gaining momentum.

Researchers are working to match treatments to an individual's specific biology, genetics, and disease stage—moving toward more personalized Alzheimer's care. Like ultrasound delivery of the new medications directly into the brain, straight to the affected area.

7. Real-world treatment data is improving patient care.

Through the Alzheimer's Network for Treatment and Diagnostics (ALZ-NET), researchers are collecting information on patients receiving new therapies to better understand safety, effectiveness, and long-term outcomes in everyday clinical practice.

8. Prevention research continues to grow.

Studies continue to strengthen the evidence that managing cardiovascular health, staying physically active, maintaining social connections, getting quality sleep, and addressing hearing loss may help reduce the risk of cognitive decline.

9. Global investment in Alzheimer's research continues to increase.

The Alzheimer's Association now invests more than **\$490 million** in over **1,200 active research projects across nearly 60 countries**, making it the world's largest nonprofit funder of Alzheimer's research.

These are huge leaps and bounds in reference to keeping our loved ones for just one more moment. The pop-up gardens help to start the conversation. A big part of the gardens are the Alzheimer's flowers shown in the pictures. Each of the flower colors represents a different meaning. The color Purple denotes a loved one lost to Alzheimer's, Blue represents an individual living with this disease, Yellow is for the individuals caring for and supporting Alzheimer's patients, Orange supports the cause and vision of a world without Dementia, and the White flower- the great hopeful White flower- symbolizes the hope for our first survivor. The Purple flower represents my family's experience with Alzheimer's. We watched my Mother battle this disease and ultimately succumb to it. One more moment would have meant everything to our family. There is not enough money in the world to purchase a moment of time, however, the monies raised by our walks have been used in research to possibly get that one more moment we all long for.

This steady path in research the Alzheimer's Association has taken, along with the exciting breakthroughs these medical professionals have timelessly pursued and achieved, may allow us to have that one more moment and for the individual to hoist the White flower in the air with great jubilation.

My fellow companions, I implore you to seek out the walks in your area. Speak to everyone at work, church, and especially your chapters to form teams and locate sponsorships for this great and glorious undertaking. Much information can be found at the website www.alz.org.

The art of being wise is the art of knowing what to overlook.

“A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his glory to overlook an offense.

Proverbs 9:11

GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Companion Javier Amaya, Scribe, Potomac No. 88

The Name in the Vault

On the Hiding and Recovery of the Sacred Word

Every Companion remembers the moment in our degree when the long search finally ends and the sought-for Word is recovered. It is the heart of the Royal Arch, and the more I sit with it, the more I notice something easy to miss. The Word was never really lost. It was hidden on purpose, kept safe, and waiting all along for the right people to come and find it. That small shift in how we read the story opens a door, and behind that door is one of the oldest ideas in all of Western faith. The true Name of God is so holy that it is not meant to be spoken aloud, and the act of hiding it is not secrecy for its own sake. It is reverence.

The idea begins in Hebrew Scripture. When Moses stands before the burning bush and asks what name he should give the God of his fathers, the answer is the four-letter Name we call the Tetragrammaton, written in English as YHWH (Exodus 3:13 to 15). It comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to be,” and the tradition has always understood it as a name of pure existence. He who is, who was, and who will be. Yet almost from the start, that Name was set apart. By the time of the Second Temple, the people no longer spoke it in everyday life. When a reader reached those four letters in the text, he said *Adonai* instead, meaning “Lord,” or later simply *Ha-Shem*, which means “The Name.”

This was not a case of people forgetting. It was a choice to protect something precious. Jewish teaching held that only the High Priest spoke the Name aloud, and even then only once a year, deep inside the Holy of Holies, on the Day of Atonement. The people sang while he spoke so that the sound of it would not drift outside (Mishnah, *Yoma* 6:2). When the Temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., that single yearly moment stopped, and the way to pronounce the Name slipped out of common memory. What survived was the written form, copied with great care, and the substitute word spoken in its place. The Word was not gone. It was covered over and held in trust, waiting for a worthy time and place to be restored.

It is hard to miss how closely this mirrors our own work. The Royal Arch does not treat the Word as something dropped and forgotten. It treats it as something hidden by design and recovered by those who labor faithfully and search in the right place. The substitute word that the Craft carried for so long stands in the same relation to the true Word as *Adonai* stands to that four-letter Name. It is an honest stand-in, valued not for itself but because it points toward something greater. To recover the Word is not to make it up. It is to be welcomed into what was there the whole time.

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Early Christian writers inherited this same reverence and carried it in a new direction. The Gospel of John opens by saying that “in the beginning was the Word” (John 1:1), tying the divine Word to the person of Christ. Centuries later, Christian scholars of the Renaissance who studied Jewish mystical texts saw the two ideas as one. The hidden Name and the eternal Word were two ways of pointing at the same mystery, a truth that holds all of creation together while staying veiled to everyone but those who are ready. Thinkers like Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin even treated the letters of the Name as a kind of ladder for the mind, a way to climb from the spoken substitute toward the original that could not be spoken at all.

The Hermetic tradition adds a line that many Companions will recognize. As above, so below. If the Name expresses the very being of God, then to search for it is to search for the pattern behind everything, and the seeker is changed by the searching itself. Seen this way, the hiding of the Name is not a wall built to keep out the unworthy. It is more like patience extended to those who are not yet ready. A truth handed over too early is a truth nobody really understands. A Word recovered through effort, humility, and the support of brothers becomes a Word that has shaped the very person who finds it.

That may be the deepest lesson of the vault. We usually think of loss as bad luck and recovery as good fortune. The older wisdom turns that around. The Name was hidden as an act of reverence. It was preserved as an act of faithfulness. And it can be recovered as an act of grace. The Companion who has stood in the place of discovery comes to understand that the long search was never wasted effort. The search was the very thing that prepared him to receive what had been waiting for him from the beginning.

We live in a time that has little patience for things kept hidden. We tend to believe that anything worth knowing should be instant and plainly spelled out. The Royal Arch gently disagrees. Some things are guarded not to keep us away but to draw us forward, to teach us through the work of seeking how to value what we finally find. The Name was in the vault the entire time. The labor was ours, and in the end, so was the reward.

Source: Original research by the author. Scriptural references from the Holy Bible (Exodus 3:13–15; John 1:1). Rabbinic reference from the Mishnah, tractate Yoma 6:2. Renaissance sources: Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Johannes Reuchlin on the Kabbalistic interpretation of the Divine Name. Composed June 2026.

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GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

Companion A. N. (Andy) Hampton, Cradock No. 72

What is a Companion?

As we walk through our Masonic journey, different phrases are utilized to identify each other. We are told from the beginning that regardless of titles or positions, you cannot go wrong by referring to another Mason as “Brother.” So, as we complete the first three degrees and venture into Virginia’s York Rite combined Cryptic and Capitular degrees we hear a different moniker. If you listen closely before being exalted the term Companion comes to the forefront. What is a “Companion” in the modern vernacular, and what may have inspired this term of endearment to be chosen for Chapter? Why Companion in Chapter and not Brother? Although not well defined, if we search our hearts, the answer may come into focus.

After World War I, Masonry expanded rapidly as returning soldiers rejoined civilian life. Potentially in part to regain some sense of moral calibration, but also due in part that likeminded men perceived a need for the camaraderie they lost post service time. To be amongst brothers that were willing and able to allow their shields to come down behind the tiled door where the world’s concerns were held at bay. A level of trust that grows into various forms of companionship is what may be found in a Lodge or Chapter room.

Merriam-Webster (2026) states that companion is a compound word derived from the Latin *Com* meaning “with” and *Panis* meaning “bread.” Thus, the Latin word “*Companionem*” translates to “Bread Fellow.” The literal meaning of one who eats bread with another, or messmate. As we matriculate from the first three degrees of masonry, we learn as Craftsmen and Master Masons we should be paid wages if any be due. We also find out the Master’s word “is lost.” In the degrees of Capitular and Cryptic Masonry we learn how to receive a master’s wages, that the word is not truly lost but found, and develop a deeper growth in our masonic walk. Arguably through our travels of the long, rough, and winding roads, we are presented with the opportunity to build and develop, grow and nurture deeper bonds with our fellows. Henceforth it is logical to ascertain that through those travels we might grow beyond brothers and truly become Companions.

In the Holy Bible there are Companions traveling throughout the ages. The Jewish people traveled as Companions, with Moses for years in the desert. Soldiers traveled as Companions enforcing the Roman laws. Shadrack, Meshach and Abendigo were Companions (and Brothers) in the fiery furnace and were joined by another that brought them through it. Disciples traveled as Companions for the purpose of communicating the “Word” on behalf of the Mesiah. Lastly, an example of Companionship on another level is mentioned without fanfare or a great deal of elaboration in three separate books in the New Testament:

Matthew 9:2 “And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed...” (The Holy Bible, 1975). Mark 2:3 “Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them.” (The Holy Bible, 1975). Luke 5:18 “Some men came carrying a paralyzed man on a mat

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and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.” (The Holy Bible, 1975). Mat carriers are how these men are described, and only in Mark does it specify the number of them being four (4). These are illustrations and accounts by three different authors that define something perhaps more than Brothers. Dare I insinuate that what they describe were Companions. No mention of a familia connection, yet their act of service to the man on the mat or bed was one demonstrating a very deep connection. It is presumed that in their minds, they had to get their Companion within close physical proximity of Jesus. The location they believed they needed to get to (that close proximity to Jesus), to have their faith be fulfilled in the miracle **they desired**, that **their Companion needed** was not permissible. The man could not walk, and one man could not get him through the throng of the crowd. So, what did they do to see through the commitment to their Companion? Scripture tells us that they took him up on the roof and lowered his mat through the tiles, into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. Now that is Companionship at a high level. Those four men were truly Companions. Men who **did not seek to evade the burden**, who **did not fear the ridicule of the crowd** for pushing past them, were focused and determined **to see their obligation through**. Through their act of compassion and Companionship, their faith that not tomorrow but now this had to be done, their Companion was healed. Companionship goes further than a meeting once a month or an occasional charity event. Words of encouragement, guidance, or observations of other avenues to consider is the difference between being fraternal brothers, and fraternal Companions. We all need those that will carry our mat when we cannot do it ourselves. Reinforcing the Latin, it is also a blessing when Companions enjoy breaking bread together and find possibilities for further and future travels.

What is a “Companion” in the modern vernacular, and what may have inspired this term of endearment to be chosen for Chapter? Why Companion in Chapter and not Brother? Although not well defined, if we search our hearts, the answer may come into focus. Being our Companion’s mat carrier and taking a corner to aide in their travel while traveling ourselves through the sometimes rough and winding roads of this life is a testament to being a Companion. Ecclesiastes Ch. 4 Vs 9-10 states “⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up.” Ask yourselves, “who are my Companions that will take a corner and carry me through?” Some have many, some may be able to name four without hesitation. Some might struggle to name one.

Who are the Men in your corner?

Merriam-Webster. (2026, March 20). *Companion definition & meaning*. Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/companion>

(1975). *The Holy Bible*. Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville Tennessee