



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

The Keystone

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

Ho, Companions!

Son of Man, Mark Well: The Work Continues

My Companions,

As I write this final article as your Grand High Priest, I do so with a grateful heart and a deep appreciation for the trust you have placed in me. With our Grand Annual Convocation approaching, I find myself reflecting on the privilege of serving this Grand Chapter and on the Companions whose friendship, dedication, and encouragement have made this year meaningful.

Throughout this Capitular year, we have shared a simple but solemn charge: “Son of Man, Mark Well.” I hope those words have encouraged each of us to look more carefully at our work, our relationships, and the obligations we have assumed. They ask us to pay attention, exercise sound judgment, and recognize the opportunities before us to serve.

As the year draws toward its close, that charge invites an honest examination. Have we truly lived our obligations? Have we made our mark upon the Craft? Have we strengthened the bonds of fellowship within our Chapters? Have we helped another man find greater understanding and purpose in his Masonic journey?



These are questions each of us must answer through our conduct.

I have often spoken of Visibility, Viability, and Versatility. Our continued strength depends upon all three. We must be present in our symbolic Lodges and willing to explain the importance of Royal Arch Masonry. We must build Chapters that offer meaningful fellowship, sound instruction, and opportunities to serve. We must also be willing to examine how we conduct our business and welcome new ideas while faithfully preserving the principles and ritual entrusted to our care.

That responsibility belongs to every Companion.

Our call to Recruit, Retain, and Re-Engage must continue into the coming year. Invite the Master Mason who is seeking further light. Sit beside the newly Exalted Companion and help him understand the lessons he has received. Call the Companion whose chair has been empty. Ask how he is doing. Offer a ride. Let him know that his presence matters.

A personal invitation may open the door, but the fellowship he finds within will give him a reason to return.

Companions, I remain convinced that our greatest opportunities are found in these ordinary acts of care. A thoughtful

conversation, a patient explanation of the ritual, or a sincere offer of help can have a lasting influence. Each is an opportunity to live the teachings we profess and leave a worthy mark upon another man's life.

To our Grand Officers, District Deputies, Chapter officers, committee members, instructors, and degree teams, thank you for your labor and your willingness to serve. To the Companions who prepare meals, arrange meetings, support our charitable efforts, and quietly attend to the countless details that make our work possible, please know that your efforts are appreciated. To our ladies and families, thank you for the time, patience, and encouragement you give so freely.

I am grateful to the Past Grand High Priests whose counsel and example have helped guide me. Each of us receives this office as a temporary trust, with a responsibility to care for the Grand Chapter and prepare the way for those who follow.

As we remember the Companions we have lost, let us honor them by carrying forward the lessons they taught us. Teach what you have learned. Encourage someone who is still finding his confidence. Preserve the work through faithful practice and patient instruction. Their influence continues through the care we give to those who come after us.

encourage each of you to join us at Grand Annual Convocation. Come to renew friendships, participate in the business of your Grand Chapter, and offer your support to the Companions who will lead us in the coming year. Give them your encouragement, your honest counsel, and your willingness to work beside them.

My time in the Grand East will soon conclude, and I look forward to continuing my service as your Companion. It has been an honor to serve you, and I will always treasure the fellowship we have shared.

Mark well the work before you. Mark well the needs of your Companions. Mark well the example you set.

May we remain ever mindful of the needs of others, diligent in our labors, and generous in our service. May your labors always be performed in love and harmony.

“For many are called, but few Chosen.”

Fraternally,

Kyle William Strickland
Grand High Priest
Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons in
Virginia

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GRAND KING'S MESSAGE

Ho, Companions!

Niksen

“It is awfully hard work doing nothing.”

Algernon, Oscar Wilde. *The Importance of Being Earnest*

One of my favorite memories is sitting on the wraparound porch at my Aunt Cora's house in Hamlet, North Carolina. The sky was blue, pine trees surrounded us, and their scent filled the air. Sometimes a bird would fly by, or the dog would wander past. It felt like there were no worries at all. My thoughts drifted along, relaxed and unfocused. Now, with my busy life, that porch feels far away.

Recently, during a storm, I looked out the window and watched the rain, my mind wandering from one thought to another. Suddenly, lightning flashed, and I was flooded with worries about work and the challenges ahead in the coming week. This cycle of negative self-reflection can build up stress, burnout, and anxiety. But there is something we can try—or rather, not do at all: *niksen*.

Niksen is the Dutch practice of simply doing nothing. The word comes from the Dutch noun *niks*, meaning "nothing." Linguist Olga Mecking describes it as “doing something without a purpose.” Page 31. This could mean staring out the window, listening to music without thinking, or relaxing under a tree. Some people call it “goofing off or puttering (Mecking 33).” It is not the same as



meditating, checking Facebook or email, or doing any other goal-oriented activity, even if those activities are relaxing.

Maybe the Dutch are onto something. Studies and surveys show that the Dutch are among the happiest people in the world (*WHR Dashboard*). In the Netherlands, happiness comes from many sources. Some people mention the strong social support and close communities, while others point to

the country's beautiful scenery. There is little food insecurity, the food is excellent, and the healthcare system is strong. Dutch children are also among the happiest. Some say this is thanks to the three “R's” of Dutch parenting: *rust*, *regelmaat*, and *reinheid*, which mean calm, regularity, and cleanliness (Mecking 70).

On top of all this, there is *niksen*, which adds something special to daily life. Dutch health journalist Gebke Verhoeven first wrote about it in 2017. In her essay, she quoted psychologist Lidewy Hendriks: “To be able to make good decisions, your brain needs the chance to process the stimuli you pick up throughout the day. This happens not only during your sleep, but also at moments when you have nothing to do or are just muddling through. This allows stimuli to be processed and organized; subsequently, the brain links a feeling to that information and those impressions (Verhoeven).”

A 2006 article in the journal *Science* showed that people make better decisions about

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complex issues after a period of idleness, as this lets unconscious thoughts guide them (Dijksterhuis et al.). This idea led to the theory of unconscious thought. According to this theory, “decisions about simple issues can be better tackled by conscious thought, whereas decisions about complex matters can be better approached with unconscious thought (Dijksterhuis and Nordgren).”

Instead of focusing on one idea at a time, our unconscious mind can process many things at once, like “concrete facts, statistical data, physical features, emotional valence, and more (Stoycheva).” Taking time to be idle gives our brains a chance to do this, making what seems like unproductive time actually very useful.

Do many people try to do too much, accomplish more, or squeeze in one more task? Absolutely. Craig Phillips writes, “This relentless drive for productivity can lead to feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and disconnection from our own needs and desires. The concept of *niksen* challenges traditional notions of success and encourages us to rethink our relationship with time (Phillips).” Many people are driven to fill every moment and dislike having empty time.

What else does *niksen* offer? In addition to better decision-making and productivity, it can boost creativity. This was one of Leonardo da Vinci’s greatest strengths, driven by his endless curiosity, or *curiosità* (Gelb). In quiet moments, we can connect new ideas and find solutions. Some people also find that *niksen* helps reduce tension, stress, and even burnout (Groskopf).

How does *niksen* affect the brain?

Neuroscience shows that a brain region called

the default mode network becomes active when we stop focusing on tasks. This has been observed using brain scans called fMRI (functional MRI). The brain switches to this default mode when we are not paying attention to the outside world. This network is active during quiet moments, like daydreaming and self-reflection. It helps us understand ourselves and how we relate to others (Menon). With all these benefits, what could possibly go wrong?

Sometimes it helps to look at things from another angle to fully understand them. In our April 2026 Keystone, we reviewed neuroscience research urging caution about mind-wandering. The paper said, “a human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind (Killingsworth and Gilbert 932).” In that essay, I wrote, “this isn’t to say that we must become the consummate Stoic and believe that *all* daydreaming or mind-wandering should be eliminated.” Mind-wandering can be harmful when it turns into negative self-reflection. Negative self-talk can become cognitive distortions that make us believe things are worse than they are.

I often reflect on Psalm 139, where David wrote that he is wonderfully made (Schofield, Psalm 139.14). When I study the details of the kidney, how bone marrow creates new blood cells, or how brain neurons communicate, I see what King David meant. As a physician and scientist, I agree with him. Our bodies are incredibly complex, and our understanding of them continues to grow rapidly. “Over 1.5 million scientific articles on biomedicine and life sciences are now published...every year (González-Márquez et al.).” That’s more than 4,000 new articles

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each day. We are indeed fearfully and wonderfully made.

Let's end by remembering our childhood companion Winnie-the-Pooh. He and Christopher Robin were walking in an enchanted place, having a conversation much like one you might have with a grandchild. Let's listen in:

"What do you like doing best in the world, Pooh?"



Fig. 1. Christopher Robin and Winnie-the-Pooh, Ernest H. Shepard, 1928. The House at Pooh Corner

"Well," said Pooh, "what I like best———" and then he had to stop and think... He said, "What I like best in the whole world is Me and Piglet going to see You, and You saying 'What about a little something?' and Me saying, 'Well, I shouldn't mind a little something, should you, Piglet,' and it being a

hummy sort of day outside, and birds singing."

"I like that too," said Christopher Robin, "but what I like *doing* best is Nothing."

"How do you do Nothing?" asked Pooh, after he had wondered for a long time.

"Well, it's when people call out at you just as you're going off to do it, What are you going to do, Christopher Robin, and you say, Oh, nothing, and then you go and do it."

"Oh, I see," said Pooh.

"This is a nothing sort of thing that we're doing now."

"Oh, I see," said Pooh again.

"It means just going along, listening to all the things you can't hear, and not bothering."

"Oh!" said Pooh (Milne, ch. X).

Fraternally, with love, and every good wish,

Joel

Joel T. Bundy, MD
Grand King

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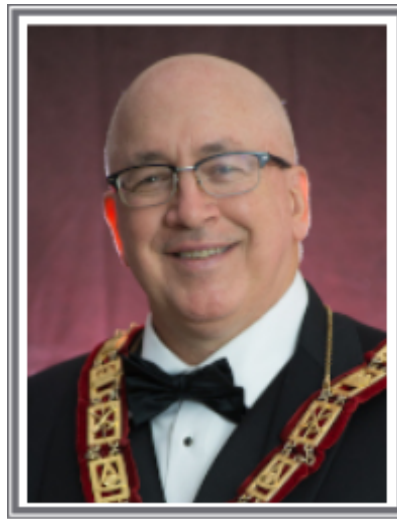
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GRAND SCRIBE'S MESSAGE

Ho, Companions!

Who is my neighbor? In each Masonic obligation we take, we are told that it will not conflict with our duty to God, our country, our neighbor, and ourselves. Pretty straightforward, but you may have the same question that was famously asked in the Book of Luke.



You may remember that the answer was given in the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which can be recounted quickly as follows: A lawyer asked how to gain eternal life, and when asked his understanding of the requirements, said to love the Lord with all your heart, your mind, your strength, and your spirit, and to love your neighbor as yourself. When told that if he does all of those (which is impossible, of course, because we continue to fail and fail in perfectly performing our duties), he asked, “but who is my neighbor?”

He was then told the story of a Jewish man on the road who was attacked by thieves and left naked and half dead. A priest and a Levite (both men who served God in the Temple) saw him on the side of the road and, not wanting to get involved, passed to the other side. But a Samaritan (who had fierce mutual hostility with Jews) stopped, had pity on the man, bound up his wounds with wine and oil, took him to an inn, and paid the innkeeper a significant sum to take care of him.

When this Parable was finished, the lawyer was asked which one was a neighbor to the

man, and his response was the one who showed the stricken man mercy.

Think of all the Masonic lessons in this story. First, the symbolic use of corn (food supplied at the inn), wine (to cleanse the wounds of infection), and oil (to help the wounds heal). Second, and more importantly, we Masons have been taught this lesson in many ways, such as the Rite of Destitution.

The lawyer probably thought, like we do, that a neighbor is someone we know and who lives near us. It is easy to help people we know, but our obligations go much further. We are required to help anyone who needs our assistance, even if the person is someone we do not like or who is very different from us.

Do you remember in the Closing Charge that we are solemnly bound to befriend and relieve anyone who needs our assistance? This is not an easy requirement, but as our Grand Master says, we are to set an example for others, that we are striving to be better men and should have a higher standard for behavior than society at large.

I encourage you that, when you encounter a person who needs help, you really “see him” and his needs, love him as a fellow human being, and help to the best of your ability. My brethren, as the lawyer was told at the conclusion of the Parable, “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/>

**Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons in Virginia
Grand Council Cryptic Masons in Virginia
Committee on Education and Service
Annual Report (2025 - 2026)
27 September 2026**

Most Excellent and Most Illustrious Grand Officers and my dear Companions all,

On behalf of your Grand Chapter and Grand Council Committee on Education and Service, I am pleased to provide this report of our activities for the 2025-2026 Capitular and Cryptic year. There has been diligent work in the quarries to continue to make education more accessible to the Companions. During this Capitular year, the committee supported educational sessions, correspondence courses, regular educational contributions to The Keystone Newsletter and the expansion of our online library with additional programs and resources.

The committee maintained a schedule of quarterly online educational sessions and coordinated presentations on subjects relevant to the Capitular and Cryptic bodies. Our March session presentation was titled “The Keystone – New Technology” by Companion Bret M. Thomas, PHP, the June session presentation featured Companion Christopher S. Tripp, DDGHP/DDMIGM, whose program was titled, “From Babylon to Jerusalem: Return from Captivity” and the September session presentation featured Companion Ryan-nathaniel Yakstis, PDDGHP/PDDMIGM, with his program, "The Necessity of Destruction: How Loss Leads Us On, in Private and in Chapter”. The presentations were well received and were added to the library for the Companions to readily access. The online session format allows Companions from both in and out of our jurisdiction to participate without the burden of travel.

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Companion Stephen L. Young, PDDGHP/PDDMIGM, editor of The Keystone Newsletter, published six (6) issues of The Keystone this Capitular/Cryptic year. In addition to your committee members contributing articles many Companions did so as well, which made each publication robust and anticipated. The feedback is that they were all well received and are an excellent tool to keep the Companions educated, engaged, and involved. Contributions to The Keystone by all Companions are encouraged. Submissions may be sent to: thevakeystone@gmail.com.

The correspondence course remained available through our online learning platform. As a reminder, this tool is a shared resource with the Grand Commandery Knights Templar of Virginia for which we reimburse one half of the cost (\$99) each year. The committee monitored submissions and completions and graded work where required for manual submissions. There was a total of six (6) successful attempts at completing the modules of the course this Capitular/Cryptic year. Unfortunately, this number is significantly less than last year and certainly much less than it should be. At a minimum, each incoming District Deputy and the dais officers of each Chapter and Council should be taking it each year. Considering that the course changes each year, it is a great tool to employ. We continue with our efforts to encourage the Companions to utilize the course to grow their Capitular and Cryptic knowledge. The District and Chapter Education Officers are also being encouraged to coordinate group sessions so the Companions can work together to complete the course. This has proven to be enjoyable and quite successful in the past. The accomplishment of those who submitted their registration forms and payment along with successfully completing the course continues to be published in The Keystone Newsletter.

Your committee continues to face the significant challenge that many of its members are heavily involved in many areas of the Craft and therefore are limited in the amount of time they have available for the committee's work. Keeping that in mind, the goals set forth for the committee were ambitious but certainly necessary for the improvement of the Craft. Strong communication and cooperation among the various committees and the Grand line, as well as increased contributions from Companions, are essential elements to positive strides being made in the future.

The committee's membership for 2025-2026 was comprised of the following Companions: Huey P. Allen Jr., Michael H. Ashley, John B. Kendrick, James C. Landerkin, Joseph M. Matthews, Clayton J. Mitchell, David M. Strohsahl, Christopher S. Tripp, Jeremy B. Utt, Ryan-nathaniel Yakstis and Stephen L. Young.

I thank the members of the committee, our presenters, The Keystone's editor, and the Companions who shared their knowledge during the year. I am also grateful for the support of the Grand Chapter and Grand Council officers, their predecessors, and the membership. Their cooperation has helped us extend these educational opportunities across Virginia and beyond.

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Serving as your Grand Provost for the past six (6) years has been a privilege. Together, we have expanded our educational offerings and made them available to Companions within and beyond our jurisdiction. As Companion Ryan-nathaniel Yakstis assumes this office, I ask that you extend to him the same support and encouragement you have shown me. Thank you for the opportunity to serve.

Respectfully submitted,

Ray

Raymon W. Bacchus
Chairman
Committee on Education and Service

The Pyramid Poems of Masons* Royal Arch Degree

MAY
HOLINESS
TO THE LORD BE SO
ENGRAVEN UPON ALL OF
OUR FUTURE THOUGHTS, WORDS, DEEDS, AND ACTIONS

MAY
WE DAILY
SEARCH FOR THE TRUTH, MAY
WE SHARE THE PURITY OF
THOSE WHO HEAR AND KEEP THE SACRED WORD

*Potts, David Easton, *The Pyramid Poems of Masons*, Broken Column Press, 2025

In the prologue of this book, the author explains “each poem stands alone” and “joins in sequence to shine light on the ancient York Rite Degrees” in a design of:

FIVE
LINES OF ODD
NUMBERS IN VERSES
ONE THREE FIVE SEVEN AND NINE
SYLLABLES - TWENTY-FIVE AND NO MORE

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GRAND CHAPLAIN'S MESSAGE

Companions,

Most of us can recognize growth in a tree long before we notice it in ourselves. Year after year, a tree adds another ring. The change is gradual, but over time it becomes evident. It stands stronger and more prepared to withstand the storms that come its way. The growth of a Christian man often follows the same pattern.

We live in a world that celebrates visible achievements, yet some of the most important work in a man's life happens quietly. Character is developed over time. Patience is learned through challenges. Faith is strengthened through prayer, study, and trust in God during ordinary days.

Throughout this year, we have been encouraged to consider the words, "Son of Man, Mark Well." Those words remind us to pay attention, not only to the world around us, but also to the condition of our own hearts. Are we growing in our faith? Are we making time for prayer? Are we showing kindness, patience, and understanding to those around us?

None of us reaches a point where growth is no longer needed. God continues His work within us throughout our lives. That work also requires us to care for ourselves. Many Companions devote their energy to family, church, Chapter, and community responsibilities, often leaving little time to rest and renew their spirits.

Even our Lord withdrew from the demands of daily life to pray and seek communion with His Father. We, too, need those moments of reflection and renewal.

As we continue our journey through life and Masonry, let us make room for spiritual growth. Let us seek wisdom in God's Word, strength through prayer, and encouragement from the Companions who walk beside us.

A Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank Thee for Thy patience and guidance. Help us to mark well the condition of our hearts and to seek Thee daily. Grant us wisdom to grow in faith, strength to overcome our weaknesses, and discipline to remain faithful in our walk with Thee. Renew our spirits, guide our steps, and help us become the men Thou wouldst have us be. Amen.

Fraternally,

RE William A. Crosscup, V
Grand Chaplain

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CHAPTER / COUNCIL NEWS

William B Millican Royal Arch School

Joey S Martin, SECRETARY/TREASURER William B Millican School of Royal Arch Masons

We have wrapped up this year's William B Millican State Royal Arch School, and I hope you were able to attend. This is our annual school held the last weekend in July. Next year's Millican School will be July 30 & 31, 2027, at DC Shanks Royal Arch Chapter #31 inside Taylor Masonic Lodge #23 at 1200 Texas St in beautiful Salem, VA. Please mark your calendars and plan on attending. Should you desire hotel recommendations, please feel free to reach out to me at your convenience.

If you were unable to attend this year's William B Millican School, it kicked off Friday morning with a hot breakfast of assorted biscuits and coffee at about 8 AM. Shortly thereafter, we started into the degree work under the expert tutelage of Most Excellent Russel Snodgrass, our Grand Lecturer, with the first class assistance of Right Excellent Christopher Tripp, our Associate Grand Lecturer. These Companions guided us through the council degrees to start the day. A few Companions requested some one-on-one instruction to polish some parts of the Mark Master degree, and Right Excellent Tripp met with them inside another room to provide the assistance. At the completion of the council degrees, questions were discussed, and answers were provided to all. The next degree to be exemplified was the Mark Master degree. Along with the Companions, who had requested and received individual instruction, knocked it out of the park. The Past Masters degree was next up, and Most Excellent Russ answered many questions and was able to dissect the difference between this degree and the Provisional Lodge of Past Masters that we provide to our Blue Lodges. The school then broke for lunch, which was parallel to the lunch at our state festival in June. Companions enjoyed fellowship, food, and delicious cookies. After a cold drink, it was back to work. The school then proceeded to the Most Excellent Masters degree. As in the degrees before, some questions were raised, and ME Russ and RE Chris were able to provide the desired information. The session ended with an open discussion on ritual questions, floor work, and procedures. When school ended for the day, many Companions retired to some fabulous fellowship and refreshments, with many assembling at a later hour at a favorite local Italian restaurant.

Saturday morning at 8 AM, the Companions, along with many new faces, enjoyed biscuits, doughnuts, and coffee. The William B Millican School started promptly at 9 AM with District 9 arriving in full force and exemplifying the Royal Arch degree. This was a beautiful sight performed by ritualists skilled in the craft. The RA degree finished up around 10:40 that morning. District 9 then proceeded to dispense with the chapter so everyone could enjoy a fresh hot lunch. After lunch was consumed to the nourishment of our bodies, District 9 resumed labor and then proceeded to close the RA degree. Once closed, at the request of ME Snodgrass, the school then proceeded to practice some ritual not often touched on in our schools, such as balloting, etc. Once all the companions' questions were asked, the floor was open for discussion.

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Several positive statements were made, along with many great suggestions to take under advisement. One prominent suggestion was for the state's area schools to present a team and put forth a degree of their choosing. It was also suggested that maybe individual districts could do this as well.

The Companions did not derogate from the final part of the William B Millican School when asked for dates and location of next year's event. It was well accepted to have it right back at DC Shanks as mentioned earlier. The next item of business was the election of officers. The Millicans school's president Most Excellent Bill Owens conducted the elections per protocol. ME Owens was quickly nominated and seconded for president. One hundred percent in attendance was in favor. The same followed for Most Excellent Russel Snodgrass being elected to the office of vice president as well as myself, Right Excellent Joey Martin, to the office of secretary/treasurer. We all are pleased and enthused to serve the Companions in our roles.

From a bird's-eye view, the William B Millican state school was yet again successful. Companions from across the state were present. We had 34 companions collectively across both days. Among these were Most Excellent Kyle W Strickland, the 185th Grand High Priest of Royal Arch Masons in Virginia, Most Excellent James P Nunn, Most Excellent William R Owens, Most Excellent Hafford L Arritt, Jr, Most Excellent Joe G Broce and Most Excellent Russel G Snodgrass. That's 5 past GHP's plus many Grand Line officers. Not only was great instruction given at the William B Millican school, it was a great time to fellowship with many of the Grand Line officers and get to know them on a personal level. I ***strongly urge you*** to get these dates for next years school on your calendar quickly.

On behalf of the school I would like to thank the following chapters and Companions for their donations that make this school a success. Companion Harry Hammack, Waynesboro RA No. 2, Cradock RA No.72, Pearisburg RA No.29, Petersburg Union RA No.7, Shennandoah RA No.17, Orange RA No.47, Arlington RA #35, Fauquier RA #25, Richmond Washington RA No.3-9, John Dove #21, O'keefe No.26, Keystone No.58 and EH Gill No.50. Thanks to every Companion across our great commonwealth for your continued support.

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

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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.

Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons in Virginia The Henry Strickland and Billy Mutter Charity Golf Tournament



Companions, friends, and supporters from across Virginia joined for a day of fellowship, friendly competition, and charity in support of one of the Grand Chapter's signature charitable endeavors. Proceeds from the tournament benefited the Alzheimer's Association and the Masonic Home of Virginia REB Memory Unit

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

The Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons of Virginia celebrates an extraordinary day of unity and Light at the Most Excellent James A. Field, Jr. Festival of Degrees, held on August 29th in Waynesboro, Virginia. Warmest congratulations are extended to all newly exalted Companions.

The day was elevated by the presence of the Grand High Priest, three Past Grand High Priests, seven Grand Line Officers, one District Deputy, numerous Companions and eighteen candidates from across the Commonwealth.

Heartfelt appreciation is extended to all the Companions who labored in the ritual. Your skill, preparation, and devotion ensured that each degree was delivered with excellence, reverence, and meaning.

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From the opening moments of the day to the final handshake of congratulations, the Festival reflected the very best of our fraternity — unity, mentorship, and the shared pursuit of Light.



Most Excellent Kyle W. Strickland, Grand High Priest, and Most Excellent James A. Fields, Jr. (PGHP, 2013) join the candidates.



The Degree Team: 1st row - Mt. Ex. Russel Snodgrass (2002), Rt. Ex. Joey Martin, Mt. Ex. Kyle Strickland, Mt. Ex. James Fields, Jr (2013), Rt. Ex. Gerald Hogan, Rt. Ex. Johnny Ewers,

2nd row - Rt. Ex. Thomas Varner, Rt. Ex. Frederick Dixon, Rt. Ex. Eric Swortzel, Rt. Ex. Gregory Hosaflook, Companion Matthew Caldwell, Rt. Ex. Christopher Tripp

3rd row - Rt. Ex. Stephen Young, Rt. Ex. Ronald Sturm, Companion Warren Johnson, Rt. Ex. Frank Hall, Mt. Ex. James Nunn (2025)

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On September 2, Waynesboro Union No. 2 paid a fraternal visit to Rockingham Union No.27 to accompany Rt. Ex. Thomas Varner, Grand Scribe, (and Grand Junior Deacon of Grand Lodge) on this portion of his “Valley Campaign” to promote York Rite in Virginia lodges. Our five Companions were joined by Companions from Shenandoah No. 17 and Richmond Washington 3-9.

First row: John Albert, Russ Snodgrass, Matt Phillipi, Worshipful Master of Rockingham Union No. 27, Tom Varner, Wayne Wenger,



Second row: Steve Young, Rusty Johnson, Emory Merryman, Dennis Parmerter, Alan Spear, David Bennet.

Barrett No. 76 - Submitted by Right Excellent John B. Kendrick, Chapter Secretary

On Monday, September 14, Barrett Royal Arch Chapter No. 76 conferred the Select Master, Royal Master, and Most Excellent Master Degrees on four candidates. Members of Castlewood Chapter No. 34 and E.H. Gill Chapter No. 50 were also present to assist in the conferral of the Degrees.

Companion Brad Fleming of Barrett Chapter No. 76 conferred the Select Master Degree. Companion Peyton Kendrick of Barrett Chapter No. 76 conferred the Royal Master Degree. Right Excellent William Dean Robinson of Castlewood Chapter No. 34 conferred the Most Excellent Master Degree. All members of the Degree Teams performed their roles in a distinct and impressive manner.

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The candidates were: J. Tyler Byrd, M. Adam Casto, Jake A. Elkins, and C. Todd Garrett. Companions present were: Chris Rakes, Wade Rose, Jordan Rose, Joe Fannin, John Wilmot, Steven Moore, Peyton Kendrick, John Kendrick, Clifton Mullins, Brad Fleming, William Robinson, Danny Bentley, Tommy Steffey, and Ed Bush.

Also in attendance from the Grand Chapter were: Rt. Ex. Joseph M. Matthews, Associate Grand Provost; Rt. Ex. Lyle W. Hartsock, District Deputy Grand High Priest - 10th District; and Rt. Excellent Roger L. Elkins, District Deputy Grand Master - 11th District.

**Life can't give me joy and peace; it's up to me to will it. Life just gives me time and space;
it's up to me to fill it.**

I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live. Deuteronomy 30:19

Dost thou love life? Then do not squander time, for that is the stuff life is made of.

Remember how short my time is...

Psalm 89:47

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GUEST CONTRIBUTOR

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

A CRYPTIC CIPHER

PART III

So finally, why might the AIQ BKR cipher be veiled within the Royal and Select Master degree? Within the ritual as found in Virginia, we find there were 27 selected to work in the secret vault. Specifically, Twenty-two from Gebal, together with Adoriram, Ahishar, and the three Grand Masters.

Furthermore, when asked why there were 27, we learn “There were nine arches and three only admitted in an arch.” Here we see a clear allusion to the twenty-two Hebrew letters, along with five final or “sofit” forms of Kaf, Mem, Nun, Pe, and Tsadi, which total the twenty-seven letters used within the cipher. We also clearly see the nine chambers with three letters per chamber. The nine chambers could be interpreted as the nine arches. Interestingly this does not align to the common Pigpen cipher, but it perfectly matches the AIQ BKR cipher.

Outside of Virginia ritual, the concept of the 27 in groups of three within the nine arches remains the same, but a mystical meaning is further elaborated. The Select Master Degree lecture found within the Textbook of Cryptic Masonry, authored by Jackson H. Chase, 33°, and published in 1870, explains how the “Chaldeans wore triangular pieces of metal, sometimes stones, on which were engraven certain characters called talismans, the possession of which they imagined gave them power over the spirits and mortals.” It describes how the “Arabians have the tradition that the word was engraved on a seal and gave them power over the Dives, Afreets, Ghouls and other evil spirits, imprisoning them and confining them at the bottom of the sea by impressing on them the signet. By them it was called a talisman or conferrer of power. By the Egyptians they were worn as amulets.” It goes on to explain how Enoch deposited a triangle on which was engraven the ineffable word. It also notes “the Eastern nations have the tradition that the key was composed of small squares joined together called a Zuarga.”

It appears the Cryptic Council’s Select Master degree was derived from the Select Master of 27, No. 1, whose earliest form may be found in the Francken Manuscript and was introduced into the Island of Jamaica by Moses Cohen, from North America. This form of the ritual’s catechism

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notes, “How many did they select?” “27 in number.” Why 27 and no more?” “For erecting of 9 Arches in the Royal Vault, 3 for every arch, which makes the number 27.” “Why did they appoint 3 only for every arch?” “This is a secret not known to me as yet.” This degree also discusses “chesed” or mercy and the following degree the pillar of beauty eluding to the Kabbalistic tree of life and thus an association to Kabbalah may be drawn.

There is a lot of evidence that the AIQ BKR cipher may be alluded to in the degree, but what evidence corroborates this hypothesis and what was its use if so? Perhaps there is additional information veiled within degrees known or lost, or maybe it’s just a coincidence. There are many questions that arise. Why does the Royal Arch degree present the Pigpen Cipher rather than the AIQ BKR to read the mysterious characters on the sides of the Ark of the Covenant? Was this to make the ritual more in tune with English speaking countries? Why is the Ark is read right to left, the same way Hebrew is read? Why not veil the key in the ritual in a way that expressed the Pigpen rather than the AIQ BKR? Is the AIQ BKR alluded to for more esoteric purposes? Is the triple Tau actually a character derived from the AIQ BKR cipher? Do these secrets exist in older or different versions of the ritual? These are all questions worth exploring as we dig deeper into the mysteries contained within the degrees.

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Virginia's Royal Arch and Cryptic Council Degrees: Why We're the Same, but Different Part 1: From the Colonial Era to the Mid-19th Century

By David Easton Potts, PHP
Arlington Royal Arch Chapter No. 35

Virginia's Royal Arch Masonry operates a bit differently than elsewhere. We are affiliated neither with the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons International nor the General Grand Council of Cryptic Masons International but maintain fraternal relations with these bodies and with chapters and councils in the United States and other countries. And we confer the Cryptic Council Select and Royal Master Degrees (in that order) prior to the Holy Royal Arch Degree. Here is how we arrived at the structure we are accustomed to.

Royal Arch Masonry arrived early in Colonial Virginia, though its provenance and dates of arrival remain unclear. There were multiple pathways, including British military travel lodges. The first documented evidence of an American conferral of the Royal Arch Degree was at the Fredericksburg Lodge in 1753. That same year and place, young George Washington was raised a Master Mason, but there is no lodge record indicating that he was also exalted to the Royal Arch.

The Grand Lodge of Virginia was organized in 1778 as America's first independent grand jurisdiction. Of its initial ten lodges, five held charters from the Grand Lodge of England ("Moderns"), four from the Grand Lodge of Scotland (aligned with the "Antients"), one from both, and one from North Carolina. There were other lodges in Virginia operating at that time under Pennsylvanian and Irish charters and also under the law of "immemorial custom", in which a charter was not deemed necessary. Ritual variations abounded.

In Eighteenth-Century Colonial Virginia, Royal Arch Degrees were worked in lodges under Master's Warrants. For example, Cabin Point Royal Arch Lodge No. 8 in King George County, established in 1775 under a North Carolina warrant, recorded the 1783 conferral of the "Super Excellent Degree of Royal Arch Mason" on one William Lambert.

Norfolk Lodge, holding a Grand Lodge of England charter from 1741, assisted in the formation of the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1778 and became Norfolk Lodge No.1. In 1805, the Royal Arch work of Norfolk and nearby Naphtali Lodge merged to form the unique Grand United Royal Arch Chapter of Norfolk. Robert Brough, past master of Norfolk Lodge and future Grand Master and first Royal Arch Grand High Priest of Virginia, was elected "Most Reverend Grand High Priest" of the Norfolk Chapter.

In 1790, the Grand Lodge of Virginia granted permission to the Staunton Lodge to form the Union Royal Arch Chapter. In 1792, Richmond Royal Arch Chapter first met (and still meets) in

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Richmond's Mason's Hall. A Royal Arch Chapter was organized in 1799 in the Winchester Lodge, while it was still under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania. In these early years, Royal Arch spread across Virginia from multiple origins. It took decades to bring them together.

Webb's Monitor of 1797 had a unifying impact on Virginia's York Rite Masonry. Thomas Smith Webb published *The Freemason's Monitor* in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1797. The book's sections on Craft ritual were faithful copies of William Preston's *Illustrations of Masonry*, first published in London in 1772. In his Monitor, Webb added observations on other York Rite rituals: Mark Master, Past Master, Most Excellent Master, and Royal Arch Mason, as well as the Orders of the Red Cross, Knights of Malta, and Knights Templar.

The same year as Webb's publication, Royal Arch delegates met in Hartford, Connecticut, to found the General Grand Chapter of the Northern States, forerunner of the General Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons International. Virginia Royal Arch Chapters had not, by then, established their own Grand Chapter and deferred consideration of joining.

The number of Virginia Royal Arch Chapters increased over the next decade, necessitating more consistent rules and regulations. In 1806, chapter representatives gathered in Norfolk to draft a constitution for a Grand Chapter. The approved ritual included the Hiram Legend as a Landmark and the Holy Royal Arch Degree as part of Ancient Craft Masonry. *The Most Excellent Supreme Grand Chapter of Royal Arch, Excellent and Super-Excellent Masons of Virginia* was established at Richmond's Mason's Hall in 1808, with ratification by its founding subordinate chapters: Norfolk United Royal Arch Chapter No. 1, Union Royal Arch Chapter (Staunton) No.2, and Richmond Royal Arch Chapter No.3. Robert Brough from Norfolk was elected and installed as its first Grand High Priest. [1809]

The Cryptic Council Degrees were brought to Virginia by Jeremy Cross in 1817. Cross was one of the early "Roving Ritualists" and is credited with combining the Royal and Select Masters Degrees to form Cryptic Councils. The Select Master Degree, with conflicting claims to its origin, is the older of the two and may have been a side degree of the Rite of Perfection. There are records of its conferral in Charleston in 1783 and Baltimore in 1792. The first claim of a Royal Master conferral was in New York in 1804. Under an apparent warrant from Maryland, Cross constituted Richmond Council No. 1 in 1817 (on Christmas Day) and Dumfries Council No. 2 in 1818.

James Cushman, another notable roving ritualist and described as an emissary of Cross, traveled to Virginia two years later. Cross was then busy elsewhere, showcasing his book *The True Masonic Chart, or Hieroglyphic Monitor*. In 1820, Cushman attended Virginia's Grand Chapter Annual Convocation and exemplified the Royal Arch Degrees as worked in the General Grand Chapter. As a result of Cushman's efforts, the Virginia Grand Chapter adopted these rituals based on Webb, changed its name to the *Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons in Virginia*, and appointed Cushman its first Grand Lecturer.

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With Virginia Royal Arch access, Cushman expanded Cross's early Cryptic Council Degree work, establishing councils in Norfolk, Portsmouth, Petersburg, Lynchburg, Staunton, Williamsburg, and Winchester. Together with Richmond and Dumfries, these nine councils formed the *Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Virginia* in December 1820, with jurisdiction over the Royal, Select, and Super-Excellent Master Degrees. This was the second Grand Council of Cryptic Masonry formed in the United States, the first being in Connecticut a year earlier.

It's important at this point to bring attention to Dr. John Dove, Virginia's preeminent freemason of the 19th Century. A successful Richmond physician, Dove was raised a Master Mason in 1813 and then served in senior York Rite positions for more than 60 years. At his death in 1876, he was Grand Secretary of both the Grand Lodge and Grand Chapter, as well as Grand Recorder of Virginia's Grand Commandery of Knights Templar.

Dove had become a Council Degrees student and protégé of Jeremy Cross at the founding of Richmond Cryptic Council in 1817. When James Cushman arrived in 1820, Dove was already Grand Chapter Secretary. He and Cushman worked closely together in forming a Grand Council for Virginia. Dove was elected the first Deputy Grand Master of the *Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Virginia*.

Off to a good start, Cryptic Masonry in Virginia unfortunately struggled during the next two decades. The chilling influence of the "Morgan Affair" of 1826 and the rise of the Anti-Masonic Party (1828-1838) dimmed overall enthusiasm for Freemasonry. Between 1830 and 1839, there were only 15 councils in Virginia and no Grand Council Assemblies.

In 1841, facing uncertain viability and questions arising that Cross and Cushman may have been Royal and Select Master Degree "self-constituted authorities", Virginia's Grand Council resolved to surrender all control over the Council Degrees to Virginia's Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons. Control was accepted, including all Council assets and responsibilities. The Council Degrees were first integrated into Virginia's Capitular Degrees in the order of Mark Master, Past Master, Most Excellent Master, Royal Master, Select Master, and Royal Arch Mason. In 1845, they were rearranged in the more chronologically coherent order still in use: Mark Master, Past Master, Select Master, Royal Master, Most Excellent Master, and Royal Arch.

The advantage of Virginia's Council Degrees integrating into the Royal Arch at that time was that the degrees survived. The disadvantage, of course, was that relationships with the rest of the Royal Arch community became complicated. Grand Chapters and Grand Councils in many jurisdictions did not recognize the Virginia system. Grand Councils would not admit Virginia Royal Arch members to meetings unless they were "healed" or joined a council. When admitting Royal Arch Masons from other jurisdictions who were not council members, Virginia chapters either omitted the Council Degree signs or asked visitors to retire until the chapters had completed the opening rituals.

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Returning to John Dove and Craft Masonry for a moment as we come to the end of Part 1, Dove's widespread reputation led to his being elected chairman of the 1843 National Masonic Convention in Baltimore, the high-water mark of efforts to standardize American Masonic rituals. Dove also served as a member of the convention's Standing Committee on Work. The Baltimore Convention delegates ratified the committee's recommendations, and the agreed-upon rituals for Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master Mason were exemplified. The Committee on Work was ordered to publish and distribute its efforts. However, the committee fell into disarray during the editing process. Charles W. Moore, Grand Secretary of Massachusetts, and John Dove, Grand Secretary of Virginia, had a falling out. Moore went ahead and published *The Masonic Trestle-Board* in 1843, which was vigorously challenged by Dove and the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Dove published his own version of Baltimore's work, *The Virginia Text-Book*, in 1846. This event foreshadows the coming

[Part 2 Continues Virginia Royal Arch from the Mid-19th Century to the present]

The author is indebted to the following Virginia Royal Arch Companions for their unpublished papers and presentations: Samuel Atkinson, George Bierman, John Bullach, Ed Carpenter, Barry Constant, Benjamin Hill, Douglas Jordan, Leonard Kilian, E. Robinson Lee, Donald McAndrews, Rhey Solomon, Thomas Varner, Andrew Vellenga, and Carl Weaver.

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What is a Companion?

Companion A. N. (Andy) Hampton
Cradock 72

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 and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus.” (The Holy Bible, 1975). Mat

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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 “⁹ Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: ¹⁰ If 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?

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