

“MODERNS vs ANCIENTS”
An Oration Delivered by Dr. Bing Johnson, 32° KCCH
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While Masonry is very old it is constantly changing. It is true that the speed of change may be glacial, but none the less it happens. The evolution of the Grand Lodge is an example.

The present United Grand Lodge of England was formed as the result of a union between the Premier Grand Lodge or Moderns and the Ancients Grand Lodge on St, John's Day Dec. 27, 1813 ending sixty two years of strife and opposition. Only two Grand Lodges were involved in 1813 although there had been five Grand Lodges claiming jurisdiction over all or part of England.

One has to wonder how two Grand Lodges could cause each other so much strife for sixty two years. Those were very different times and the difficulty in communication and travel, royalty and class distinction undoubtedly played a part in that deadfall part of our history.

The Premier Grand Lodge of England was formed on June 24, 1717 in London as the first Grand Lodge in the world by the joining of the lodge at the Goose and Gridiron, lodge of the Crown, and lodge of the Rummer and Grape and lodge of the Apple Tree Tavern. The meeting was chaired by the oldest Master Mason. Anthony Sayers was elected as the first Grand Master.

The Grand Lodge meet only annually for the first four years and the only business transacted was the election of a new Grand Master and Grand Wardens and their installation. There is no evidence that the Grand Lodge acted as a regulatory body until late 1720. Nor is there any

evidence that they were concerned with lodges outside of London and Westminster.

In 1720 changes began to be noticed. It is believed that George Payne and the Rev. Dr. John Theophilus Desaguliers were credited with compiling the first regulations and the introduction of the aristocracy and men of intellect from the Royal Academy. The Duke of Montague became the Grand Master in 1721. From that on time the Grand Lodge began to meet more regularly and to exercise powers of a regulatory body.

The Premier Grand Lodge went through a difficult period from the 1730s to the 1760s. Freemasons were held in low repute in England. A series of processions of mock Masons had cast ridicule on the Order. A sign on one tavern said "Masons made here for 2s,6d." Grand Masters from 1742 to 1752 met infrequently and were ineffective.

The emergence of a rival Grand Lodge in England was due primarily to the activities of Irish Masons who came to London in large numbers because of a population explosion and an agricultural crisis in the 1740s. The Grand Committee met for the first time in 1751 and represented more than one hundred Masons made largely in Ireland. These Masons had been refused entry to London lodges either on the grounds of their class, as they were largely tradesmen and merchants or because their ritual didn't conform with the changes that had been made in England.

The Premier Grand Lodge is said to have regarded the Grand Lodge of Ireland (formed in 1725) and the Grand Lodge of Scotland (formed in 1730) with an air of condescension and doubted the regularity of lodges constituted by them. These Grand Lodges resented the assumption of superiority by the Premier Grand Lodge and that the lodges constituted by them were irregular.

The first task of the Grand Committee was to draw up a set of regulations for the government of the Grand Lodge and its subordinate lodges. In 1756 Laurence Dermott, 32 years of age, published the first constitution of the Ancients Grand Lodge titled Ahiman Rezan—meaning help a brother which was a mixture of Anderson’s Constitution and Irish regulations. He said his object was to let the Brethren know that they ought to conduct their actions with uprightness, integrity and Brotherly Love still keeping the ancient Landmarks in view.

Dermott claimed the Premier Grand Lodge had departed from Ancient Landmarks and perverted pure Ancient Masonry. He said his lodge was working according to the Old Constitutions. Hence the two rivals became known as the Ancients and Moderns, although the later was by far the senior.

The Ancients Grand Lodge was a much more democratic organization. The Grand Master had no independent authority; a decision had to be ratified by the Grand Lodge.

Much of the Ancients success was due to the many traveling warrants they issued to regiments of the British Army, forming lodges that traveled with and met wherever there was a request. These lodges would admit local civilians, who would apply for a warrant when the Army moved on.

The Moderns regarded any Mason made in an Ancients Lodge as having been initiated in a clandestine manner and could bring down censure upon the offender.

The original itinerant Irish members of the Ancients were soon replaced by English artisans, tradesmen and minor professionals that brought business skills and established a firm administration.

Possibly because of its members social backgrounds the Ancients was a much more democratic organization. The Grand Master had no independent authority and decisions he made had to be ratified by the Grand Lodge. All Grand Officers were decided by the Grand Lodge.

Dermott molded the Ancients into an equal of the Premier Grand Lodge so that when movement toward the Union began they were able to deal with the Moderns without any sense of inferiority and could insist on certain criteria before they would agree to the Union.

Between 1768 and 1772 vigorous unsuccessful attempts were made to incorporate the Premier Grand Lodge by an act of Parliament. The Ancients regarded this as an act of war and ordered all fraternal communication to cease. The Moderns forbade its members to countenance the Ancients in any way.

The Moderns were charged with:

- 1) Transposing the modes or recognition in the First and Second Degrees. The Ancients regarded this a complete violation and alteration of a Landmark that was impossible to countenance.
- 2) Omitting prayer.
- 3) De-Christianizing the ritual.
- 4) Ignoring and neglecting the Saints' Day. This was a very serious charge.
- 5) Omitting in some cases to prepare candidates in the customary way.
- 6) Abbreviating the ritual, in particular having neglected the so called lectures. The Ancients regarded the lectures as essential and their omission as being nothing less as sacrilege.
- 7) Ceasing to recite the Ancient Charges at initiation.

- 8) Introduced austerity into the ceremonies, in particular there was no place for swords except for the Tyler.
- 9) Allowing the esoteric at the installation of a Master to fall into disuse.
- 10) Departing from the ancient method of arranging the lodge. The Great Lights probably had different positions and the Wardens stations were different. The work was not the same in opening and closing of the three degrees.
- 11) Ignoring the Deacons. The Moderns Lodge had no Deacons until about 1809.

Problems began to arise in dealing with the Grand Lodges of Ireland, Scotland and the United States none of which were willing to recognize both Grand Lodges in England.

The turning point to end this untenable situation came in 1809, by which time most leading Moderns had become convinced that Union was essential and that their body must take the step toward it. That step was passing a resolution saying “that it is not necessary any longer to continue these measures which were resorted to about 1739.” The wording of the resolution left little doubt that what the Moderns had been accused of had actually been done by them. It must be understood that at the time of the Union the Ancients in England and Ireland greatly exceeded the numbers of Moderns in England.

In 1809 The Premier Grand Lodge ordered their lodges to reverse the ritual changes made in the late 1730s and warranted a special Lodge of Promulgation to look into various differences between its rituals and those of other Grand Lodges. There is a general consensus that the Moderns

largely restored the 'Ancient' forms and ceremonies and in doing so considerably revised the first three degrees, remolded the installation ceremony and restored the role of the Deacons.

As a result committees of both Grand Lodges were set up in 1810 to negotiate an equitable Union. The Moderns committee led by the Earl of Moira, was given full authority to work out the basis for a Union, but the Ancients committee had to refer every decision back to their Grand Lodge for approval. This dragged out the negotiations so that in 1811 Lord Moira wrote that unless they were give full authority to negotiate there was little reason to continue the discussions.

It was not until 1813 that the two Grand Masters, the Duke of Kent and the Duke of Sussex, presiding over their respective Grand Lodges ratified twenty one articles and then passed them a few days later. Among the things ratified by them was that there should be a full, perfect and perpetual Union of the two Fraternities so that they shall form and constitute one brotherhood as the sole authority for England, Wales and English lodges abroad.

The actual Union took place in Freemason's Hall on St. John's Day Dec. 27, 1813. The two Grand Lodges opened in adjacent rooms. Then the processions entered the Hall and the two Grand Masters took their place, one on each side of the throne. The Act of Union was read and ratified. Then came the proclamation from the Grand Chaplain:

Be it known of all men, that the Act of Union between the two Grand Lodges of Free and Accepted Masons of England, solemnly signed, sealed, ratified and confirmed by the two Fraternities are as one, to be from henceforth known and acknowledged by the style and title of The United

Grand Lodge of Ancient Freemasons of England; and may the Great Architect of the Universe make their Union eternal!

The Grand Mastership of The United Grand Lodge of England was easily settled by the Duke of Kent stepping down and proposing his brother the Duke of Sussex as Grand Master. dWho personally directed the re-organization of the Grand Lodge and kept firm control over it for the next thirty years until his death in 1843. The present and past Grand Officers of the two Grand Lodges retained their status in the United Grand Lodge and a standardized list of Grand Officers was introduced. A Book of Constitutions was issued in 1815 and finally settled in 1819.

SOURCES:

- 1) Hamill, J., *THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH FREEMASONRY*, Lewis Masonic, 1994
- 2) Jones, B. E., *FREEMASONS GUIDE AND COMPENDIUM*, Eric Dobby Publishing Ltd., 2006
- 3) Harland-Jacobs, J. L., *BUILDERS OF EMPIRE*, The Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2007