

Antients vs. Moderns: What was the Problem?

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Good evening to each of you. It is my privilege to speak with you about a topic that is not fully understood by Masons, in general. I chose this topic, as I did not know much about the first Grand Lodges, the quarrels that led to what is sometimes referred to as the “Great Schism”, or the subsequent Reconciliation. I started reading and asking questions. This led to more reading and more questions, until I felt I had a decent understanding of what happened, why it happened, and why it is relevant today.

I am a relatively new Mason, with my involvement only spanning seven years. I have learned a bit about Freemasonry during lodge meetings, and from brothers in passing conversations; however, I felt a void in my Masonic Education. I turned to books and the internet. There I found an active on-line community of persons discussing and sharing their views, opinions, questions and answers about Freemasonry. I began asking questions and slowly began to learn – mostly that I had MUCH to learn.

One aspect that struck me was AF & AM lodges and F & AM lodges. I was initiated, passed and raised in an F & AM lodge in Escondido, CA. I subsequently joined an AF & AM lodge when we moved to Nebraska. I never heard much about the differences between the two – other than a vague reference to a modern version and an ancient version -- and what little I had heard, I later found out to be wrong. Therefore, I chose this topic so I could find out, **“What was the Problem?”** At the conclusion of this discussion, we’ll ask, **‘So What?’ – and ponder the relevance of this portion of Masonic History to today’s 21st century Masonry.**

My initial foray in understanding the problem was as a new Mason. I was told that AF & AM lodges were “Ancient”, or followed the Irish or Scottish Grand Lodges; that F & AM lodges descended from the ‘Grand Lodge in London’, and were “modern”. Lastly, that the differences between the two were strong enough to cause a split in the early 1700s that lasted 80-90 years. And *that* was the sum total of my education on that subject until the last couple of years.

I began my quest by contacting the members of the Grand Lodge of Nebraska’s Masonic Education Committee, to whom I owe a great debt for their patience with my questions, and willingness to share what they knew. I also began searching the internet and found many books, articles, essays, and discussion board topics that provided a wealth of information, and, unfortunately, misinformation. The Education Committee pointed me toward two books that have proved invaluable in reliable information. The first was Freemasons’ Guide and Compendium by Bernard E. Jones, and Living the Enlightenment; Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe, by Margaret C. Jacob. Through these authors, I came to realize that I could never hope to gain a proper understanding of what happened unless I was able to understand that time-period.

As I began reading and thinking about this topic, several questions came to mind;

Was this a genuine problem, or the result of petty issues?

Why couldn’t they work out their differences and prevent the split?

What events allowed the Reconciliation?

Moreover, what can we learn from this?

In order for answers to come, I found I had to immerse myself in the times. The historical events of that period were unique, as were the class-system, learning, religious dogma, even the thought processes of every-day man. Unless I could come to understand life in that period, I would fail to understand the “Problem” between the Antients and Moderns.

The origins of the first Grand Lodge lay in a period known as **The Enlightenment**. It was a time in the 1600s and 1700s of *emerging changes to society* throughout Europe. Religious and secular rule had been changing and giving way to more open, democratic forms in the prior decades, and this created an environment that allowed men to openly express new ideas. Such as the publication of Isaac Newton's **Principia Mathematica** in 1686 and John **Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding** and **Two Treatises on Government** three years later. Some argue it began earlier with the works of Bacon and **Hobbes** in England, and in France, with **Descartes's** emphasis on unaided reason. This period of European thought is equated with an emphasis on reason, experience, skepticism of religious and traditional authority, and a gradual emergence of the ideals of secular, liberal, and democratic societies.

During this time, life was slowly changing for the common-man – although the class-system was still largely intact. Schooling was largely unknown for the lower classes, but the ability to read and write was becoming more common. Newspapers were rapidly becoming widespread in their audience, and served as a forum for authors to express their opinions and share ideas. Debate or discussion circles were in vogue. New ideas were passed on and discussed in these circles. Because of the class system, these circles

were almost exclusively among peers. Moreover, this extended to the Masonic lodges of the time, as they were a reflection of society – with one difference. *In this one place, all men were equal.*

Four lodges came together in London during 1717 and formed the first Grand Lodge. Most of the members of these lodges were Operative Masons; in fact, *only one* of the lodges had a majority of its members being Speculative.

A rival Grand Lodge came into being during 1751. The former's members came to be dubbed "Moderns" while the latter's adherents called themselves "Antients".

In general, there were two main causes of the trouble. One was the apathy and neglect of the Premier Grand Lodge and its apparent inability to rule the craft. The other was the differences in ritual and ceremonial practice that existed or developed in the early part of the century.

The Grand Master was to preside only until they could have a member of the Nobility as their sponsor. Societies in England at the time had the custom of having a member of the nobility as their sponsor to serve as their spokesman in high places. Once a member of the *Aristocracy* was chosen Grand Master, it set in motion a chain of events that led to the "Schism". This Grand Master, being a member of the nobility, naturally associated with his class equals and tended to fill his appointments to the Grand Lodge with aristocrats. The class structure at that time was so inflexible that no man would set aside the rights and prerogatives of his nobility even as a Grand Master. *The result of which was to essentially import the British aristocracy into the Fraternity.*

This, of course, had not gone unnoticed. Masons who were not of the aristocracy came to resent the changes that they viewed as a departure from the original tenants of Freemasonry. Deep down, this dissension was about *fraternal equality*. Brothers had begun to criticize the social exclusivity of some lodges and to demand a more *genuine egalitarianism*. Individual Masons and then whole lodges began to leave the Grand Lodge. A large number of Irish immigrants had come to England and other lands; among them were many Irish Masons.

They sought to affiliate with lodges under the Grand Lodge, but quickly found they were not welcome. They left for lodges more along what they had known in Ireland, and many Englishmen followed. They joined or formed lodges more along the lines of “Antient” Masonry, while calling what the Grand Lodge did “Modern” Masonry. There were many other lodges, in outlying areas of England, or countries where the British military were stationed, that had infrequent communication with the Premier Grand Lodge. This was normal for the times as communications were slow and not wholly reliable. These outer lodges and military lodges tended to follow the more traditional or “Antient” form of masonry.

As the early years unfolded, Grand Masters and their Officers passed resolutions of *fundamental changes* that allowed them to eventually select all Grand Lodge officers from the aristocracy, and to sell/purchase Warrants. Thus, a minority of members had assumed influence all out of proportion to their numbers within the Fraternity.

Another unfortunate occurrence was the lack of leadership by the Grand Lodge during the first half of the 18th-century. Meetings were held only occasionally, leadership by the Grand Masters was almost non-existent.

Masonry declined in the public's eye to the point that derogatory plays and articles were made against them as *they saw Masonry as an extension of the aristocracy*. There were two notable *exposés* (1723 – “*A Mason's Examination*”; 1730 – Pritchard's “*Masonry Dissected*”) that caused considerable trouble. These prints were a measure of the considerable interest that the outsider took in freemasonry, and an indication of the public curiosity following the fuller incorporation into the Masonic ceremonies of the Hiramic legend. It led to an alarming number of irregular ‘*makings*’ that greatly troubled the Premier Grand Lodge. Not only were there a large number of Masons, real or not, within England who did not recognize the Grand Lodge, but Continental Masonry was also expanding. The member lodges of the Premier Grand Lodge found themselves facing a very difficult situation when these so-called Masons applied for admission. The Grand Lodge took the position that each of these Masons and their lodges were *irregular*, and to make it more difficult or impossible for them, it took a very serious step in 1730. It was *a transposition, or inversion, of the modes of recognition in the First and Second Degrees*, and was designed to act as a veritable *shibboleth* in preventing the admission to its lodges of any mason who, for lack of affiliation and attendance at a regular lodge, would be unaware of the change. While the Grand Lodge may have had the best of intentions, they soon paid a heavy price for their profound error in judgment. The alteration was regarded by many of their members, and by all the masons outside the organization, as a grievous and wholly improper interference with a Landmark purporting to date from time immemorial. It must also be understood that this alteration was not the only difference between masons inside and outside the Grand Lodge.

Tensions built over the 1740s until the “*Antients*” *decided to form their own Grand Lodge in 1751*. We know much about the

formative years of this new Grand Lodge through its Grand Secretary, **Laurence Dermott**. He is the author for the tract known as **Ahiman Rezon**. In it, he was the champion of the “Antients”, and he was unafraid to assault the “Moderns”. His most telling assault occurs in the proclamation that the freemason should

“treat his inferiors as he would have his superiors deal with him, wisely considering that the original of mankind is the same.”

He goes on to say,

“Equality is the prerogative of men of real worth and personal merit, not of seniority.”

The main points of difference between the ‘Antients’ and ‘Moderns’ is summed up with the following charges, leveled by the ‘Antients’:

- 1) Transposed the modes of recognition in the First and Second Degrees.*
- 2) Omitted prayers.*
- 3) De-Christianized the ritual, Anderson’s “Constitutions” of 1733 being offered as proof.*
- 4) Ignored and neglected the Saints’ Days – that is, with holding their festivals on days that were not the days of St. John.*
- 5) Omitted in some cases to prepare Candidates in the customary way.*
- 6) Abbreviated the ritual, in particular having neglected the so-called lectures, actually catechisms, attached to each degree.*
- 7) Ceased to recite the Ancient Charges at Initiations.*
- 8) Introduced austerity into the ceremonies, in particular having no place for the sword in the Initiation ceremony, except that the Tyler wore the sword.*

9) Allowed the esoteric ceremony at the installation of a Master to fall into disuse, although some of the lodges did work such a ceremony at an early date and continued unofficially to do so.

10) Departed from the ancient method of arranging the lodge.

11) Ignored the Deacon.

Therefore, we have the two sides staring at each other, eyeball to eyeball, for two generations, waiting for the other to blink first and give in. Bad feelings between the two remained at a high point right up until the Reconciliation.

During this time, a gentleman by the name of Cadwallader, the ninth Lord Blayney, as elected Grand Master of the Premier Grand Lodge in 1764. He was a professional soldier and initiated in a military lodge (from which we can infer he was actually an “Antient” mason). He strove to reconcile the two warring bodies. He also added greatly to the strength of the “Moderns” through his very great activity at his post. Under his leadership, seventy-four lodges were constituted, and he fostered the Royal Arch Degree. Undoubtedly, the strength he gave to the “Moderns” prolonged the time until the Reconciliation – however unintentionally.

Despite this, progress was made. Information flowed across the lines in both directions. There are even cases of Brethren belonging to both factions at the same time. Reconciliation finally came about when two brothers: Edward, Duke of Kent and Augustus Frederick, Duke of Sussex, became Grand Masters of the two Grand Lodges. **(On a side note, these brothers were the sons of King George III – regent during the Revolutionary War – and Edward became the father of Queen Victoria.)** The brothers are due great credit for their efforts, but the greatest credit goes to an

outstanding freemason, the *Earl of Moira*, Acting Grand Master 1790-1813. His work behind the scenes, and his influence on the two brothers, was **probably the greatest factor** in achieving peace.

In 1789, they appointed a committee to approach the “Antients” to see if reconciliation could be achieved. However, it was slow to come. Feelings had run so high that members of one faction were forbidden to even visit Lodges of the other.

They were able to work together to find ways to make the reconciliation work. There were passages of two resolutions in 1809 and 1810 by the “Moderns” that repudiated much of what they had done 60 years prior that affected the split. Lodges of Reconciliation and Promulgation were established to unionize the differences and ritual for a United Grand Lodge. On 27 December 1813, the Grand Chaplain read a proclamation that declared the formation of a United Grand Lodge of England.

The effect on modern-day Masonry of this Reconciliation is profound. The twenty-one articles of “The Articles of Union” helped to largely confirm the Antients’ forms and ceremonies, and therefore, considerably revised the “Moderns” rituals. A Lodge of Reconciliation was established to complete the changes to the ritual into a form acceptable to both parties forming the United Grand Lodge of England. A new constitution also came about, and was based on Anderson’s **Constitutions** and the **Ahiman Rezon** of the Antients.

‘So What?’ You’re now aware of the early schism that took a couple generations to resolve 200 years ago. Do the lessons of that schism have relevance today? Today we see many instance in corporate, religious and nonprofit organizations where creating splinter groups is the norm rather than seeking balance in an ever-changing world. Our membership is in decline, but we’ll have a whole new generation of fewer, but younger Masons who may suggest that Masonry might be ripe for change. Are we willing to listen and be part of that dialogue? Are we ready to apply the core values of Masonic philosophy in that venture? Noted Masonic author Jim Tresner sums it up well:

“Equilibrium, the balance between the past and the future, others and ourselves, faith and reason, truth and fact, knowledge and belief – if ever you should doubt the importance of Freemasonry to the world, just think how vital it is to have an organization teaching you those truths to the youth of the world. We are servants of a great cause. We have much to learn from our history.”