



Virtual Past Master Degree

Background of the Past Master Degree

The origins of the Past Master Degree are lost in history, and it is probably as old as the Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft Degrees. From what can be gleaned, from the earliest times, when a Master was installed in the Chair to preside over a Lodge, there was a short ceremony, usually performed only in the presence of other Past Masters, in which he possibly took a further Obligation, and was entrusted with a grip and word known only to Past Masters. It is generally believed that this ceremony might have its roots in Operative Lodges, where it would be expected that, given the close attachment to the Church, there would be some kind of ceremony and blessing when a Brother was elected to preside over his Lodge.



Figure 41 - The Earl of Rosslyn

In Scotland, indeed, the Installed Master's Degree was not even introduced until 1870 by the Earl of Rosslyn, from the English Ritual. In a declaration of 1846 it was categorically stated that 'The Grand Lodge further considers every Master Mason qualified to be elected to and fill the chair as R.W. Masons without receiving any additional secrets whatever.'

This sort of Ritual was known by a number of different names, including the Secrets of the Chair, Passing the Chair, Past Master, Passed Master, and Installed Master. The term 'Past Master' is further confused by the fact that a Master-elect could be said to be receiving the Past Master Degree, when the term

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Past Master strictly applies to a Master who has served his Lodge for the specified period, and has now vacated the East.

We have learned that the earliest form of the Royal Arch Degree was open only to Past Masters, and it quickly became evident that, given the small number of Past Masters, this important system of teaching Masonic secrets was in imminent danger of becoming extinct. It was among the Antients firstly, that a Degree which conferred the Secrets of the Chair upon worthy and well-qualified Master Masons was worked, which would entitle them to receive the Royal Arch Degree; while the Premier Grand Lodge continued to confer a Past Master Degree upon those elected as Master of their Lodge. Following the Act of Union between the Antients and Moderns in 1813, the United Grand Lodge of England took control and limited the ceremony of Installation to duly elected Masters of Lodges only. From that time the requirement for membership of a Royal Arch Chapter was reduced to being a Master Mason for a determined period of time.

The first documented mention of a Past Master's Degree is found in Anderson's Constitutions of 1723, six years after the founding of the Premier Grand Lodge, but also the time that the first Grand Secretary was appointed, and proper records began to be kept. The first mention of the Past Master Degree in connection with Capitular Masonry was in Bolton, England in 1768, when the minutes mention that nine Brothers received the Royal Arch Degree, despite not having served in the Chair as Master of a Lodge.

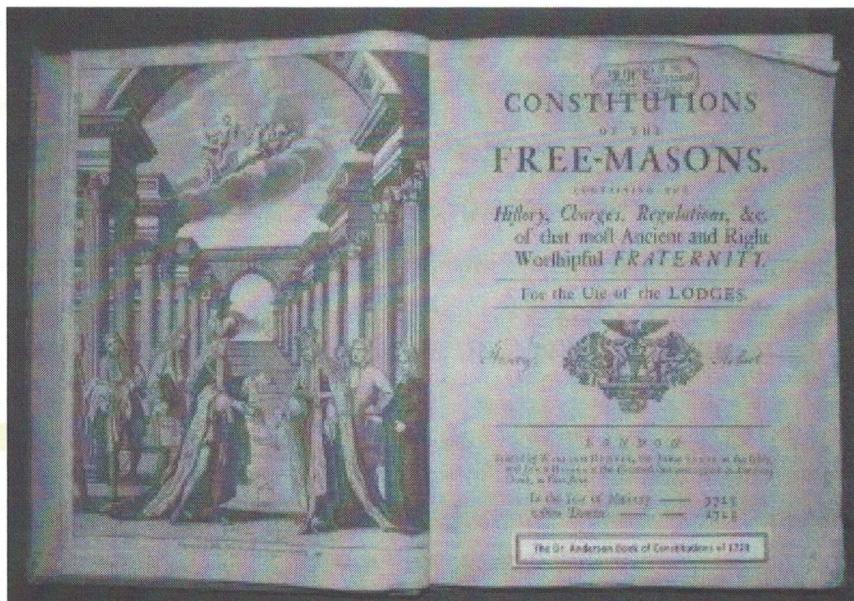


Figure 42 - Anderson's Constitutions

In the United States, it is believed that the first known mention is the working of the Excellent Degree in St. Andrew's Royal Arch Lodge in 1769, Boston Massachusetts. When St. Andrew's and King Cyrus Chapters met in 1795 to standardize their Chapter Degrees, the records of St. Andrew's Chapter reported the working of the Past Master and Most Excellent Master Degrees in place of their Excellent and Super Excellent Degrees. Many scholars are certain this simply reflects a name change, and that this indicates the Excellent Degree practiced by them was in fact a Past Master Degree.

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Naturally, given that the Past Master Degree was adopted as part of the series of Capitular Degree by General Grand Chapter, there was occasional tension with those Grand Lodges who practiced a Past Master Degree as part of its Lodge Installation ceremonies. In 1853, the Triennial Session of General Grand Chapter resolved: “This body does not claim jurisdiction over the degree of Past Master, when about to be conferred on a Master-elect of a subordinate Lodge.

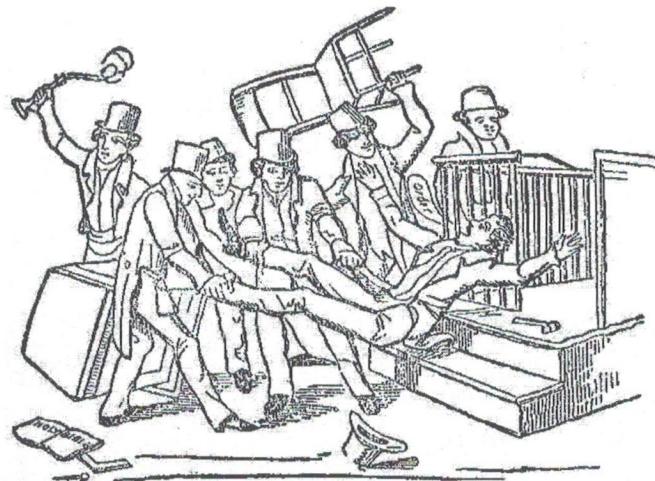


Figure 43 - Early engraving of a ribald event

Nature – and the inventive Mason – abhors a vacuum, and during the 1800s it appears the Degree of Past Master become increasingly elaborate and ribald, finally leading the General Grand Chapter under its General Grand High Priest, Charles Gilman of Maryland, to revise the Ritual in 1856. Albert Gallatin Mackey, his successor, commented in his Book of the Chapter (pub. 1858): “One of the evils resulting from the disseverance of the Past Master’s degree from its legitimate position as a part of the installation service

in a symbolic lodge, was the introduction of a number of ceremonies into the Chapter degree... At length a powerful effort was made to divest the degree of those offensive ornaments which had been gradually fastened upon it, and to restore it, as nearly as possible, to its original simplicity.”

That the Degree had become ‘offensive’ was reflected by Edmund Ronayne, writing in his 1879 exposé of Freemasonry: “Notwithstanding this recommendation, the subordinate Chapters throughout the country continued to indulge in almost unlimited buffoonery in conferring this degree... I received this degree of Past Master twice, first in the Chapter on which occasion all kinds of stupid horse-play were indulged in at my expense...”

The revised Ritual intended “to abridge the ceremonies now conferred in the Past Master’s degree within the narrowest constitutional limits, only retaining the inducting of the candidate into the Oriental Chair, and communicating the means of recognition.”

The current ritual reflects this minimalism, and the Degree is comparatively short, certainly in comparison with the now elaborate ritual conducted by a Board of Past Masters in the English Emulation Ritual. While some States no longer confer any kind of Past Master Degree, New York still holds a Board of Installed Masters in a side room prior to installing the Master-elect of a Symbolic Lodge, at which he takes his Obligation and is entrusted with the Grip and Word of Past Master.

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Unusually, the Past Master Degree performed by Ancient Chapter No. 1 in New York may still contain some of the elements referred to by Mackey, since the Ritual includes a short scene which most certainly places the Candidate seated in the Oriental Chair in an embarrassing situation. Of course, what may have been considered ribald at the time is now seen as a quaint preservation of historical ritual!

In 1942, an additional part to the Degree, called The Allegory, was composed by E.: Howard, L. M. Jones, Past High Priest of Unity Chapter No. 16 located in Dayton, Ohio was approved for optional adoption in the Virtual Past Master Degree by General Grand Chapter; is included in the Appendix of this Course.

Differences between an Actual and Virtual Past Master

Given that a Past Master Degree is practiced within a Chapter, however similar it may be in form to that practiced within the Blue Lodge system, in 1853, it was categorically declared to be unconnected with the latter Degree, as it was necessary to distinguish between the two forms of Past Master Degree practiced in Capitular and Symbolic Masonry.

Some research has suggested that there may at one time have been differences in the secrets conferred, either a slight variation in grip or password, to ensure that nobody receiving the Past Master Degree as a prelude to receiving the Royal Arch Degree could gain entrance to a Lodge of Past Masters about to confer their version upon a Master-elect. In the United States, at least, this possible difference, if it ever existed, has disappeared over time, and there is now no substantial difference between the two Rituals, other than the fact that, in the Blue Lodge setting, obedience to the Grand Lodge, its Constitutions, Laws and Edicts is sworn; and the ancient penalties are omitted. Also, only the grip and word are given. In Blue Lodge, the Charge, and the presentations of gavel, Constitutions, Charter and gavel are done in presence of the whole Lodge at the Installation Ceremony (and sometimes non-Masonic visitors if an open Installation is conducted).

Another difference is in the name. While the ceremony within a Lodge created a Past Master (sometimes referred to as an Actual Past Master), the ceremony within Capitular Masonry creates a Virtual Past Master. This is to indicate that he has not been elected by a Lodge to serve over them, nor has he been required to meet the other prerequisites such as having served as a Warden. Because of this he cannot serve as a Master in a Blue Lodge, nor expect to receive any of the rights and privileges associated with that honor. These include conferring the Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft or Master Mason Degrees, being invited to a seat in the East, or being received in a Blue Lodge as a Past Master. Similarly, many of the duties of a Past Master recited in the Chapter

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are not in fact relevant to a Virtual Past Master (such presiding at dedications, consecrations, the laying of cornerstone, and presiding at funeral services).

Variations Can Lead to Embarrassing Situations!

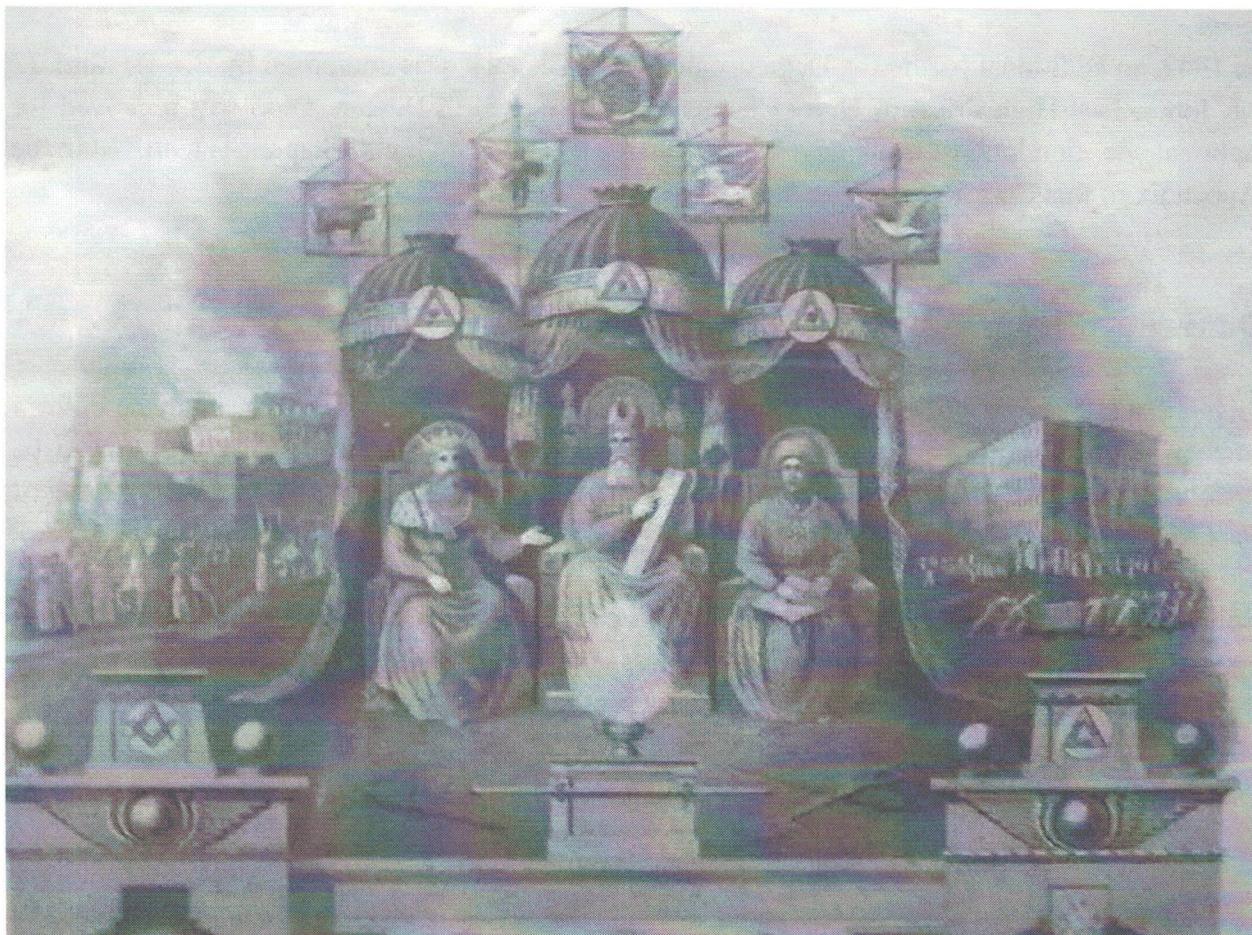


Figure 44 - The Three Principals

Unfortunately, the variations in requirements to receive – and to observe – the Royal Arch Degree can lead to embarrassment when visiting other countries. For example, while any American Master Mason can, by virtue of receiving the Virtual Past Master Degree, receive the Royal Arch Degree, and thereby rise through the offices to become High Priest of his Chapter, in England and Ireland, while any Master Masons may become a Royal Arch Mason, only those who have sat as Master of a Lodge may be elected to the three principle positions of the Council – Scribe, King or High Priest. An English Mason would find it most confusing that an American Mason could be a Past High Priest yet not Past Master of a Lodge. Another source of much confusion is that, in the Domestic Ritual (practiced in England and her Commonwealths, including Canada), the Grand

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Council are called the Three Principal Officers – and the most senior one is ‘Z’, or Zerubbabel the King. ‘J’ or Jeshua the High Priest is the second in line. And the sign given on entering and retiring is uniquely given with the *left*, and not the right hand in the English Royal Arch!

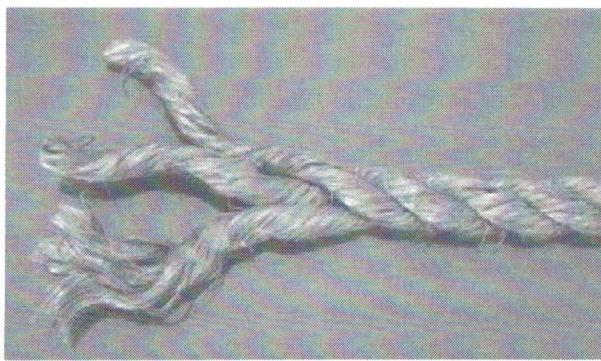


Figure 45 - A Threecord

This can lead to problems when an English Royal Arch Mason wishes to visit an American Chapter. In theory there are a few areas of concern. Firstly, if he is not a Past Master, he will not have received the Past Master Degree – and indeed in most jurisdictions receiving the Past Master Degree in a Blue Lodge is for some reason not considered a substitute for receiving the ‘expedient’ version in the Capitular Degrees! Secondly, since it is an entirely separate Body, he may not be a Mark Master Mason. Finally, since

the Most Excellent Master Degree forms part of what we call the Cryptic Council, he probably won't have received that either.

?? NO IT DOESN'T

A key issue is the fact that only Past Masters can invoke the Great and Sacred Name under a Living Arch and over a Triangle. In English Chapter the three Principal Officers raise the Arch, give the words and lower the Arch while the rest of the Companions watch. An English Royal Arch Mason is therefore not equipped to participate in our Openings and Closings.

The situation is similarly confusing for the English visiting a Scottish Chapter. Not only are the Mark and Excellent Master Degrees prerequisites, the English Royal Arch Mason will not be permitted into the Chapter until he was ‘taken the Veils’, since the Ceremony of the Veils only exists in a ‘time immemorial’ ritual confined to a few Lodges in Bristol, and the Domatic Ritual practiced elsewhere does not use veils. On the other hand, the fact that the Scottish Constitution does not require one to be a Past Master in order to receive – or confer – the Royal Arch Degree, has also led to some difficult situations in the past, since this creates a situation in which a High Priest who has neither sat as Master of a Lodge nor received the Virtual Past Master Degree can confer the Royal Arch Degree, whose validity would be questioned both under the English and General Grand Chapter Constitutions!

ANSWER
Very interesting

There are just a few examples of the many differences which can lead to embarrassment, or possibly worse, a violation of our own Obligations if we allow those who have not yet taken certain Obligations to see the working and receive the signs and words. In all cases it is best to contact the Grand Secretary’s Office to double check the situation regarding a visitor, if any notice of an impending visit has been given. In our own Jurisdiction a recent change was made to the Constitution to ensure the Mark, Past Master, Most Excellent Master and Royal Arch Degrees are

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given in that order: yes, it was discovered the a Chapter had conferred the Degrees in a random order!

The General Grand Chapter has a provision in its Constitution that if a person presents himself from another jurisdiction as a Royal Arch Mason, he may receive the preceding three Degrees in order to heal him and allow him to attend a meeting of Chapter without charge or capitation fee. However, this is impractical in most instances, since the visitor probably would not be around for the length of time required to put on the Mark, Past Master and Most Excellent Master Degrees.

When investigating a prospective visitor to a Chapter, if they hail from a jurisdiction other than one under the auspices of General Grand Chapter, you now understand that there are a number of precautions which must be taken, all the while ensuring that you in no manner offend the prospective visitor. If, for example, the visitor is a Principle or Past Principal, he may be invited to attend the conferral of the Royal Arch Degree. It is up to the High Priest whether a visitor who is not a Past Master should be allowed to attend a Royal Arch Degree, and in any event he may only observe, and not participate in the ceremony. Nobody outside the jurisdiction of the General Grand Chapter should attend the Opening and Closing of a Royal Arch Lodge, since they will not be in possession of the intervening signs and due guards of the 4th to 7th Degrees.

If a person has moved to the United States and intends to affiliate with a Chapter, it is best if they simply go through the Degrees here, so that they might be best prepared to both learn all the Signs and Due Guards, and so that the Certificate they receive will allow them free entry into any Chapter under the purview of the General Grand Chapter.

Lessons of the Past Master Degree

The Address to the Candidate expressly states that: "The Past Master's Degree, unlike all the other Degrees in Freemasonry, sheds no light upon itself." It later states: "Our candidates are made to pass the Chair simply as a preparation and qualification towards being invested with the solemn instructions of the Royal Arch."

However, it would not be strictly accurate to say that undergoing a ceremony which, symbolically at least, prepares you to preside over a Lodge is without teaching. Whether or not the Candidate actually has to go through the work of planning and running an efficient Lodge, the very act of taking an Obligation, and focusing on the accoutrements with which he is furnished provide a number of points for meditation.

Indeed, it is to be hoped that there is something to be learned in this Degree. The Address tells us that "it was doubtful to many if it (the Past Master Degree) could legally be abolished, and, the

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law still requires that the August degree of Royal Arch shall be restricted to Part Masters.” However, this statement is not strictly true, since a number of jurisdictions have removed the Degree yet their members are still recognized by jurisdictions which have not. It would also seem tragic if what was considered a meaningless ceremony was blindly followed from century to century which had no discernible use at all, simply because of blind tradition.

One author has described the lesson inculcated in this Degree as “responsible leadership.” It teaches that moderation, decorum and justice which are essential for the fair exercise of Masonic leadership, and since the Capitular Degrees are intended to make the Brothers ever more tied to the beloved Craft and teaches them to lead their younger and less enlightened Brethren through leadership, example and education, this Degree would seem to be a moment of stillness for the Candidate to reflect upon those important attributes.

The emblem of the square is worn about the neck, rather than being presented to him as a Working Tool or indicated upon the Holy Bible. It is to remind the Master forcibly that it is upon himself he must work to create the spiritual temple. He must take up the work and assume it himself in order to lead by example.

The threefold cord is likewise a reminder that, while the follower offers of himself, he must offer twice as much to help the newly-made Masons to achieve his goals. In some interpretations it manifests a lesson indicated earlier – the Capitular Degrees emphasize a transition from the physical basis of the Symbolic Degrees to a Spiritual nature. Thus the Master offers an addition, spiritual level to the grip to raise the Candidate up to a higher plane.

In particular, it reminds us that we are bound by three kinds of law: the Law of Self, the Law of Man, and the Law of God.

The Law of Self is that circumscribing of passions we learned in the first degree, the need to control ourselves in order to make us fit citizens of society and a help to our fellow man.

The Law of man is represented by the presentation of the Constitutions and Bylaws, which teach us that, as members of society, we should both abide by and as Master enforce those rules which mankind has commonly agreed to follow.

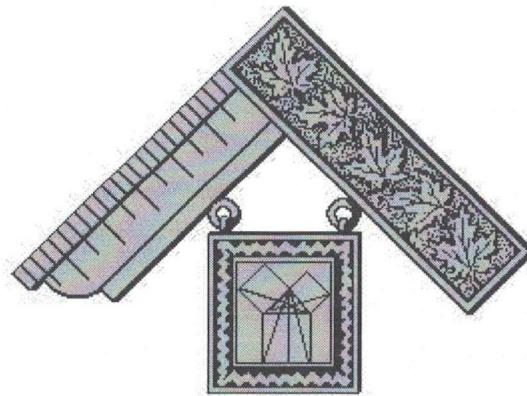


Figure 46 - An English Past Master's Jewel, including the 47th Proposition of Euclid

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Finally, by pointing once more to the Volume of the Sacred Law and invited to study and follow its precepts, we are reminded that the most sublime Law is God's, and if all our actions are calculated to do His will, we will never falter.



Figure 47 - The Past Master

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VPM Discussion Questions

- 1 What do you think about the Virtual Past Master Degree? Should there be a Degree which gives away the Secrets of the Chair to a person who hasn't served as Worshipful Master? Should we have the Degree at all – couldn't the United States simply follow other countries and allow anyone who is a Master Mason to become a Royal Arch Mason without going through the Past Master Ceremony?
- 2 We now have a Past Master Degree which, according to the revision in 1856, limits the action to installing the Candidate and giving him the grip and word. Indeed the ritual tells us that this Degree "sheds no light upon itself." Do you think this is a wasted opportunity? If you were allowed to rewrite the Ritual in order to inculcate further Masonic light or instill a moral lesson, what would it be? What would you add to the Ritual?
- 3 The (New York) Constitution currently states in Article V, Section 505.3: "One who has not received the degree of Past Master under the auspices of a Chapter cannot be permitted to be present in a Past Master's Lodge opened under a Royal Arch Warrant." Given the origin of the Virtual Past Master Degree, do you think we should recognize an Actual Past Master going through the Capitular Degrees as such, or does it make sense to have him go through the Virtual Past Master Degree?