

# CAPITULAR DEVELOPMENT COURSE

## Background and History of the Capitular Degrees



### Early beginnings of the Capitular Degrees

While Symbolic Masonry manifested itself in the public domain in 1717 in the Goose and Gridiron Public House in London, it is clear that Lodges had existed for some time previously to that. This can be gleaned both from records and minutes (for example, the Minutes of certain Scottish Lodges, and the writings of Elias Ashmole), and from logical deduction that, in order to draw

attention to their existence, the Lodges forming the first Grand Lodge must already have been in existence. And, since the first Lodges only sought to exercise jurisdiction over the Lodges in central London, by implication there must have been a number of Lodges elsewhere around England.

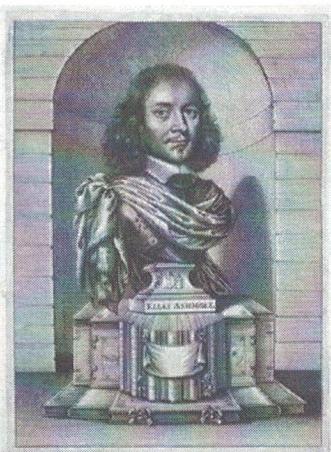


Figure 1- Elias Ashmole

This is an important fact, since, just as the origins of the Entered Apprentice and Fellowcraft Degrees cannot be determined with certainty (it is generally agreed among scholars that the Master Mason Degree was a later creation, appearing in the 1720s), the same is true for both the Mark and the Royal Arch Degrees. This means that versions of all three systems – Blue Lodge, Mark Lodge and Royal Arch Lodge or Chapter – were being practiced prior to 1717. The implications of this, assuming the Royal Arch Degree contained the lessons it currently does, are enormous. It means that the True Word was being given to certain Masons before a Degree conferring a Substitute Word was created.

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This is important since, as respected Past General Grand High Priest William F. Kuhn states in his booklet *The Necessity of the Royal Arch to the Master Mason*, commenting on a letter he had received from Newton R. Parvin, Grand Secretary and Librarian of the Grand Lodge of Iowa, “This would tend to prove that before the legend of Hiram Abif was introduced into the Master’s

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Degree the True Word was communicated in the Master's Degree and not a substitute Word." So it is possible that the True Word ended up in the Royal Arch Degree, which was considered as important as the Third Degree, since it restored the True Word, and only ignorance and politics saw it ending up as a completely different Degree run by a different Grand Sovereign Body. One recent scholar described the lamentable fact that so many Master Masons never complete their understanding by going through the Royal Arch Degree as being like a person who reads the first several chapters of a book, then sets it aside without finishing it.

The Royal Arch was practiced both among the Moderns and the Antients. While the Degree was officially recognized as being part of the Antient Rituals, it was only barely tolerated among the Moderns, who did not consider it to be part of the official Degree system. This led to a number of conflicting applications of the law. For example, in 1766 the Grand Master, Lord Blayley supported the establishment of a Grand Chapter, whose primary role was to issue Charters, thereby 'regularizing Chapters, and even allowed it to meet at Great Queen Street. On the other hand, James Heseltine, Grand Secretary of UGLE from 1769 – 1780, wrote the following to the Province of Frankfurt-am-Main, which at the time was facing competition from the Rite of Strict Observance of Baron von Hund: "It is true that many of the Fraternity here belong to a Degree in Masonry say'd *to be superior* (italics mine) to the other three, call[ed] the Royal Arch. I have the honour to be a member of this Degree and its principles and proceedings are truly praiseworthy – but it is unknown in Grand Lodge, and all Emblems or Badges or distinction in that Degree are prohibited from being worn in GL."

A confusing situation indeed!

The Royal Arch was held in such esteem by the Antients, however, that it led Laurence Dermott, Grand Secretary of the Antients, to call the Royal Arch Degree the "very root, heart and marrow of Freemasonry."

In England, for example, at the Act of Union of 1813, which joined the Moderns and Antients into the United Grand Lodge of England & Wales (UGLE), the only Degrees which made it into the officially sanctioned list, according to the second Article of the Act of Union, were: "... that pure Antient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, viz., those of Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason, including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch." An early attempt to reintroduce the Mark Master Degree was roundly defeated, and thereafter all the bodies we consider to be part of the York Rite are in England subject to completely independent Grand Bodies. However, it should be pointed out that while these Bodies are ignored by UGLE, many high ranking members of UGLE are enthusiastic members of them.

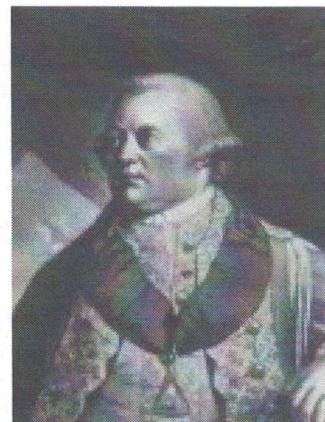


Figure 2 - Lord Blayley

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However, although the rituals of the Symbolic Degrees were established as part of the work of uniting the two Grand Lodges in England, the Royal Arch fared less well, and it was not until the 1840s that the first semi-official Ritual, the Sussex Ritual named in honor of the Duke of Sussex, was published. The early history of the Royal Arch in Europe can be found in many history books on the subject.

It is known that in most Scottish and Irish Lodges, many English ones, and from their Minutes most of the British colonies, that the Past Master, Mark and Royal Arch Degrees were habitually

conferred in Symbolic Lodges. That there was a special – if honorary – Degree empowering a Master Mason to rule his Lodge as Worshipful Master, is without doubt. Originally it was probably as short as the one we practice today both in Lodge and Chapter, for the ceremony used in the United States is broadly the same. In England and elsewhere the Past Master Degree became increasingly elaborate, so that now it is considered the jewel in the crown of the English Masonic year, and the ceremony is indeed impressive and complex.



Figure 3 - The Duke of Sussex

One of the problems impacting the very survival of the Royal Arch Degree was the requirement that it could only be conferred upon those who had served as Worshipful Master

of their Lodge. Given the relatively small number of Lodges compared to now, and the fact that not every Past Master availed themselves of the opportunity – and indeed it may not even have been available in their District or Province – it was clear that the Royal Arch Degree, even if it was seen as the completion of the Masonic experience, could have failed before it took root. This was solved in the Act of Union by simply requiring a Candidate for the Royal Arch be a Master Masons of one year's standing (now reduced to one month). As an aside, while any Master Mason may become a Royal Arch Mason in England, one is however still required to have served as Master of a Lodge prior to being installed as one of the Three Principal Officers. In Scotland and Ireland there is a ceremony of Passing the Chair, similar to the Virtual Past Master, and in both countries a Candidate must receive the Mark and Past Master Degrees prior to being Exalted to the Royal Arch Degree.

In the meantime, the Royal Arch Degree was regularly practiced in the United States, and the Act of Union in England had no impact, since America had been independent from England for some thirty-seven years by then. Furthermore, it was part of a Degree system (the ‘York’ or ‘American’ Rite), whereas in England and most of Europe there were still many variations of the Royal Arch and other Degrees being worked both in Chapter and Lodges (for example, in Dermott's Book of

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Constitutions, entitled *Ahiman Rezon* or Help to a Brother, published in 1756, we read the following comment in Rule II: “the Master of a particular Lodge has the right and authority of congregating the members of his own Lodge into a Chapter upon any emergency or occurrence.”).

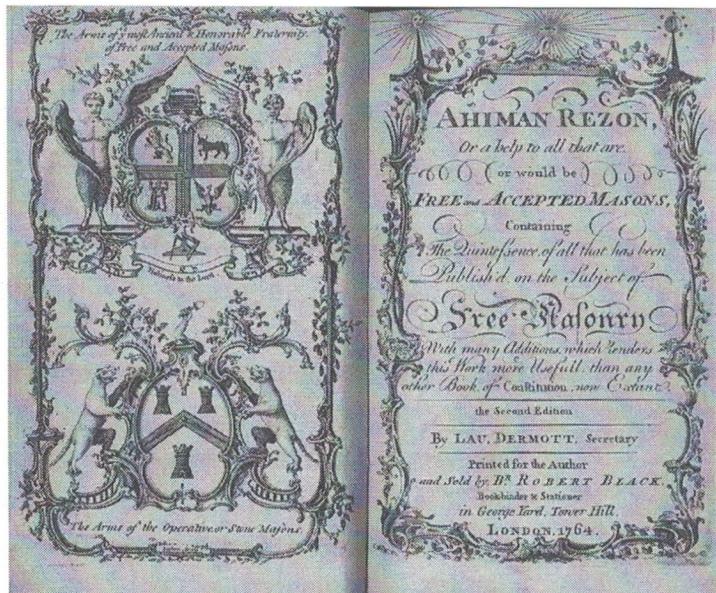


Figure 4 - *Ahiman Rezon*

While the requirement to receive the Past Master Degree was dropped at the Act of Union in England, it was considered too important a Landmark to be tampered with in the United States, and the Past Master Degree persists to this day.

But in the United States the Capitular Degrees have been unified since 1797, and the establishment of a standard series of Rituals, a progressive system of Degrees, together with an overarching American governing – later advisory – body with the authority to issue Charters to States and countries was almost entirely due to the work of one man, Thomas Smith Webb, whose diligence and commitment make him a key figure in the history of American Freemasonry.

### Codification of the Degrees in the United States – the “York” or “American” Rite

The ‘York’ Rite is a name only used in the United States, since it is only here that a number of different Degrees were collected together into a progressive system. Indeed, the source of the term ‘York Rite’ is somewhat dubious, since it is based upon an unprovable legend, fondly held by Freemasons in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, that English Masonry originated in York, either under King Edwin

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of Northumbria who converted to Christianity in 627 CE and ordered the York Masons to build a cathedral; or King Athelstan in 926 CE. Athelstan either organized or reorganized the Masons in York at that time, gave them a Charter, and placed his son Edwin in charge of them. Incidentally the Antients claimed this ancestry on their Warrants; and the Moderns claimed that same authority was “transferred many years ago to London. Ours is the real Ancient Grand Lodge of York”!

While this is certainly a glamorous story, there is no actual proof that the Charter issued by Athelstan bears a direct and unbroken lineage to our present Lodges, and indeed this is only one of many theories about our origins, and sits alongside the Knights Templar, the Ancient Egyptians, the Mediterranean Mystery Schools, and the Rosicrucians to name but a few of the more popular ones.

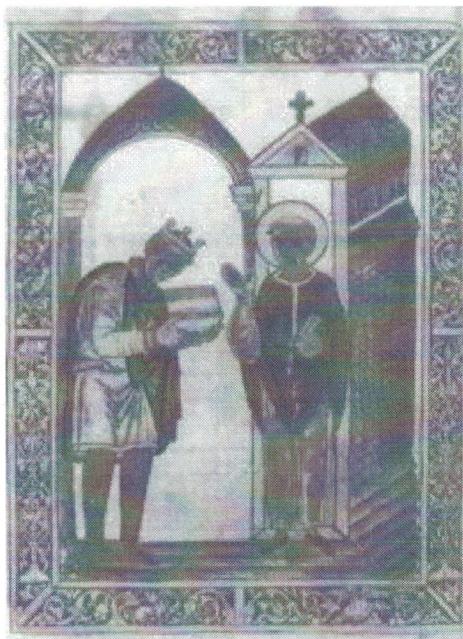


Figure 5 - King Athelstan

However, the name ‘York Rite’ to describe the system of Degrees in the United States, and to distinguish itself from the ‘Scottish Rite’, which are a series of 3 Degrees which originated in France, has become established, and is in common use today. Incidentally the reason this system is called the ‘Scottish Rite’ is because of its association with the Scottish monarchy who, beginning with James II of England, was exiled to France after attempting to reestablish Roman Catholicism in England, and he and his successors, Pretenders to the English throne, signed Masonic Charters. Sometimes the ‘York’ Rite is more correctly referred to as the ‘American Rite’, since it was created in the United States. Both ‘York Rite’ and ‘American Rite’ will be used interchangeably here.

In the United States the first record of a version of the Royal Arch Degree being worked is at the Fredericksburg Lodge,

VA in 1753, the Lodge which George Washington was Initiated, Passed and Raised. Despite many attempts, to date no credible record of Washington receiving the Royal Arch Degree has been found<sup>1</sup>. At that time the Royal Arch Degree (like the Mark Degree) was conferred in Lodges as well as Chapters – as indeed they were in England, Scotland and Ireland – and it was not until the system was codified in the 1790 that Chapters alone conferred the Degree. In 1758 the Antients Grand Lodge issued a Charter to a lodge in Pennsylvania, and they can be assumed to have exercised the rights and privileges of an Antient Lodge, which included conferring the Past Master and Royal Arch Degrees. Unfortunately there are few records which survive from this period, and it is also quite certain that during the Revolutionary War, many Lodges suspended activities or

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, however, Washington Lodge possesses a portrait of George Washington in a white apron bordered with red; and his possessions included a number of Royal Arch artifacts. Not proof positive, but a hint, perhaps.

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relocated to avoid the worst of the fighting. This can be seen, for example, in the history of Freemasonry in New York State, where all the Lodges in Manhattan, with the exception of St. John's Lodge No. 1, A.Y.M., went dormant or relocated outside New York City during this time. It is to be expected that, given the pressure of the War of Independence on the ability of Symbolic Lodges to meet, the Mark and Royal Arch Degrees were rarely worked during this time.

In the 1780s a number of Chapters came into existence, some styling themselves Grand Chapters in order to issue Charters to others. For example, *Old Royal Arch Chapter* wrote to the Grand Lodge of New York in 1783 requesting the Grand Master and Grand Officers preside over their affairs. Upon the establishment of a Grand Chapter in New York State on March 14, 1798, some of the older Chapters refrained from joining the new Grand Body. However, in 1806 *Old Chapter* and *Washington Chapter*, both based in New York City, joined and were accorded the honor of being No. 1 and No. 2 respectively (*Old Chapter* was later renamed *Ancient Chapter No. 1*).

By now several Grand Chapters existed, in New York, Pennsylvania and Maryland. In Boston the issue of obtaining a sovereign Warrant was discussed, showing that the idea of making Capitular Masonry independent from Symbolic Masonry was a major topic at that time. This led to discussions on the establishment of a ruling body, and on September 11, 1797, St. Andrew's Chapter in Boston approved a motion that "the High Priest be requested to write Br. Webb on the subject of a union of the chapters". In October, Thomas Smith Webb and John Hanmer of Temple Chapter in Albany visited Boston. Having recently published the *Freemason's Monitor or Illustrations of Masonry*, Webb's Masonic reputation was immense, and he had both the vision and stamina to see such a project through to fruition. Following the conferral of a number of Degrees, on October 24, 1797, representatives from St. Andrew and Cyrus Chapters met with Webb and Hanmer to discuss establishing a General Grand Chapter. Companion Webb presided, and a letter was sent to other Chapters inviting them to attend a Grand Convocation at Hartford, Connecticut.



Figure 6 - Thomas Smith Webb

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Figure 7 - Ephraim Kirby

On January 24, 1798 delegates from nine Chapters met in Hartford, and on January 26 a Constitution was approved which declared sovereign jurisdiction over Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont and New York. Under the Constitution, this General Grand Chapter assumed control of the Mark Master, Past Master, Most Excellent Master and Royal Arch Degrees. Ephraim Kirby was elected first General Grand High Priest, an honor which surely should have gone to Thomas Smith Webb. It is a testament to the integrity of the man that he stepped aside to ensure that Connecticut would become part of the alliance. By 1802 Thomas Smith Webb Had published a reprint of his *Monitor*, which now contained comments on the Capitular and Templar Degrees, and

South Carolina, Kentucky and Ohio had by now joined the General Grand Chapter.

The 'York' or 'American' Rite Degrees were then, as now, as follows:

## Symbolic (Blue) Lodge

1. Entered Apprentice
2. Fellowcraft
3. Master Mason

## Chapter of Royal Arch Masons

4. Mark Master
5. Past Master
6. Most Excellent Master
7. Royal Arch Mason

## Council of Cryptic Masons

8. Royal Master
9. Select Master
10. Super Excellent Master

## Commandery of Knights Templar

8. Order of the Red Cross
9. Order of Malta
10. Order of the Temple

A few points are worth noting. While the Royal Arch Degrees are open to any Master Mason, any Mason wishing to join a Cryptic Council must be a Royal Arch Companion. In New York the

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Cryptic Degrees are optional, which means a Royal Arch Masons can petition to join a Commandery of Knights Templar directly (which is why the three Orders have been numbered 8., 9., and 10. above). In a number of States the Cryptic Degrees are a prerequisite to joining the Order of the Temple. In all cases the Super Excellent Master Degree (10. In the Cryptic Rite series) is an optional Degree, and possession of the Royal and Select Master Degrees are sufficient to progress to the Templar Orders.

Note also that, while the Chapter and Cryptic Degrees are open to any Master Mason, the Order of the Temple requires a Statement of Adherence to the Christian Religion, and the Orders of Malta and the Temple take much of their symbolism from the New Testament, with many direct quotations from the Scriptures.

The colors associated with the four York Rite Bodies (for the Symbolic Lodge is seen as being part of the ‘York’ Rite) are Blue for the Symbolic Lodge, Red for the Chapter, Purple for the Council and White (and Black) for the Commandery. The fact that these are also the colors of the Royal Arch banners and veils – and for that matter the first four banners of the Order of Malta – is no coincidence.

But perhaps the most important point of all is the fact that these Degrees form a coherent path for the serious student of our Gentle Craft. Regardless of whether one continues through the Capitular and Chivalric Degrees, every country recognizes that the Royal Arch Degree as the completion of the Master Mason Degree, and without having experienced this rich Ritual which confers the True Word upon its Companions, that which had been lost until the wisdom of future generations brought it to light, one has not experienced the full story of Freemasonry as it was intended from the year it first came to the attention of the general public.

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TEXAS  
IS A MEMBER OF THE  
GGC RAMI  
*NOT*

## General Grand Chapter and the Structure of Capitular Freemasonry

The General Grand Chapter has no direct authority over its constituent Grand Chapters (unlike Masonic Templary, where the Grand Encampment is sovereign). It does however, exercise sovereignty over a number of individual Chapters around the world; and when a new Grand Chapter is chartered, relinquishes authority in that jurisdiction to the new Grand Chapter.

In its earliest days The General Grand Chapter was indeed sovereign, and originally each State had a Deputy Grand High Priest. However, this was changed and in 1859 a resolution was passed to revise the wording of the Constitution to state that the powers of the General Grand Chapter were derived from the State Bodies, and that they enjoyed sovereign jurisdiction over their territories.

General Grand Chapter now comprises forty-seven States, several Canadian Provinces, and a number of countries in Central and Latin America, Europe, Asia and Africa; including Quebec, British Columbia, Romania and Brazil to name but a few.

The permanent Members of General Grand Chapter are all Past Grand Priests of affiliated Grand Chapters, along with the elected General Grand Chapter Officers. This, including the Elected Members of State Grand Chapters, forms the voting body, which meets every three years in a Triennial. The elected Officers of the General Grand Chapter are: General Grand High Priest, General Grand King, General Grand Scribe, General Grand Treasurer and General Grand

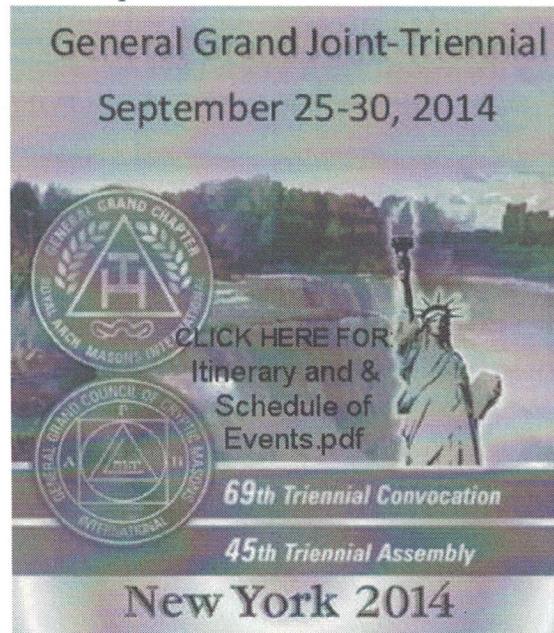


Figure 8 - 69th Triennial of General Grand Chapter

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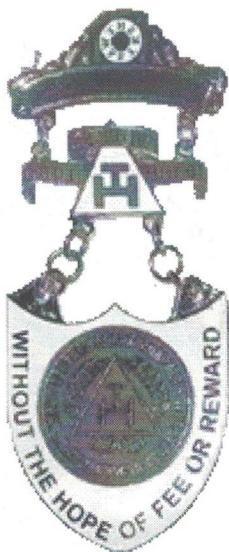


Figure 9 - Ritual  
Excellence Jewel awarded  
by GGC

Secretary; as well as the Past General Grand High Priest in an advisory and *ex-officio* capacity. The General Grand High Priest appoints ten Deputy General Grand High Priests, seven of which look after the regions of the United States, and three the overseas territories. Each territory also appoints an Ambassador, who is a Past Grand High Priest, to represent the General Grand Chapter in that State.

The General Grand Chapter supervises the growth of Chapters in new territories, until they are in a position to petition for a Warrant as an independent Grand Chapter. It issues Warrants, and provides a clearing house for ideas, particularly at the Triennial. In addition it is responsible for education and research, particularly through its quarterly magazine, the Royal Arch Mason.

It also makes available a number of awards, including one for Ritual excellence, Bronze, Silver and Gold distinguished service medals, and membership incentive programs. It also supports several charities which focus on auditory deficiencies under the umbrella of Royal Arch Research Assistance (or RARA), and maintains the George Washington Memorial Royal Arch Room in Alexandria, VA.

At a state level Chapters are organized much like Blue Lodges. There is a Grand Chapter presided over by the Grand High Priest (and occasionally also a Deputy Grand High Priest), who is the executive head of Royal Arch Masonry in that State, and who is assisted by the elected officers, the Grand King, Grand Scribe, Grand Treasurer and Grand Secretary, and a number of appointed Grand Line Officers, including Grand Representatives. At a local level Chapters are organized into Districts, each supervised by a District Deputy Grand High Priest, who is assisted by an Assistant Grand Lecturer. Once a year a Grand Convocation is held, presided over by the Grand High Priest, at which business is conducted, Grand Line Officers elected and installed, and which is attended by sitting High Priests, Kings and Scribes, as well as visitors from a number of other States. The Chapters are warranted by the Grand Chapter, with authority to confer the four Capitular Degrees, under the leadership of the High Priest, assisted by the other members of the High Council, the King and Scribe.

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## New York's Unique Place in History

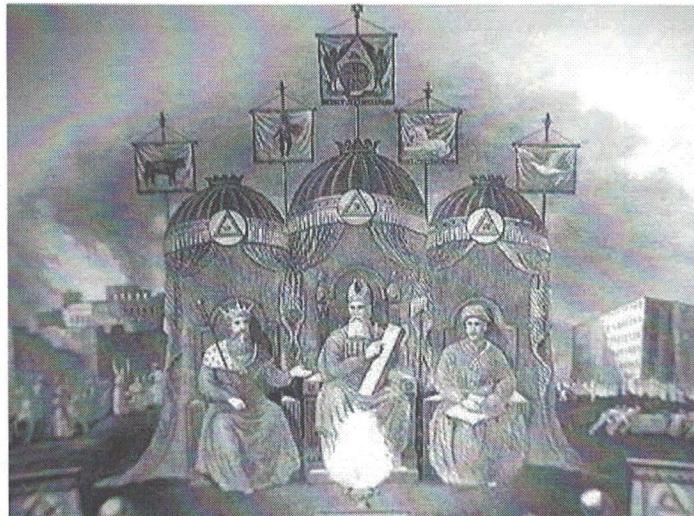
Any member of the Grand Chapter of New York, may be justly proud of his heritage. Along with the long and impressive history of Grand Chapter and the larger than life characters associated with it, consider those giants of Freemasonry who worked to establish the York Rite as one of the largest Masonic Bodies in the world, and those men who led it through its earliest days.

Thomas Smith Webb single-handedly established both the General Grand Chapter and the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar, and DeWitt Clinton, Governor of New York State, largely responsible for the construction of the Erie Canal served as General Grand High Priest.

It is a particular honor that, at the time of writing this course in 2013, M.:E.: Edmund Dale Harrison, a New York Mason, is General Grand High Priest of the General Grand Chapter, which has seen significant international expansion under his leadership; while Sir Knight David Dixon Goodwin, another New York Mason, is Grand Master of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar. In September 2014 we will see the celebration of 69<sup>th</sup> Triennial of General Grand Chapter in Buffalo, where DeWitt Clinton performed the first ceremony of the Wedding of the Waters, to celebrate a continuous navigable waterway between the Atlantic Ocean at New York City to the Great Lakes at Buffalo.

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## Overview of the Capitular Degrees

In the York Rite the four Capitular or ‘Red’ Degrees (as opposed to the ‘Blue’ Degrees of Lodge) continue immediately after the first three Masonic Degrees, continuing the Entered Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Mason Degree. The next four which comprise the Capitular Degrees are:

4. The Honorary Degree of Mark Master Mason\
5. The Virtual Past Master Degree
6. The Most Excellent Master Degree
7. The Holy Royal Arch Degree

The first three Degrees take place in a Lodge, but the Royal Arch Degree is held in a Chapter. Since all four Degrees are governed by a Charter issued by the Grand Chapter of the State, all meetings Open and Close on the Royal Arch Degree, which is the equivalent of Opening a Lodge on the Third Degree. It is on the Royal Arch Degree that all business is transaction, votes taken and minutes read and approved. The Chapter is lowered to the appropriate Degree to confer the Mark Master, Virtual Past Master and Most Excellent Master Degrees.



Figure 10 - The Rejected Stone

The **Degree of Mark Master Mason** is called a Honorary Degree primarily because, in the York Rite, it is considered an intermediate Degree on the way to receiving the Royal Arch Degree; whereas in many other jurisdictions, for example England, it is a separate Rite chartered by a Sovereign Body, in whose Lodges members meet several times a year, business is transacted on the Mark Degree, the Officers’ line is progressive, and there are annual Elections and a unique Installation ritual for the Right Worshipful Master who presides.

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The Degree of Mark Master is nowadays a combination of two former Degrees – Mark Man (equivalent in level to the Fellowcraft Degree) and Mark Master. The Degree contains many important teachings, and bases its legend upon the tradition of operative Masons who engraved their work with a personal sign or ‘mark’, by which their work was identified.

The **Degree of Virtual Past Master** is a reminder that there was once a time when the Royal Arch Degree was either considered a part of the Master Masons Degree, or a Degree which could only be conferred upon those who had presided as Master of a regular Lodge. This had proved extremely limiting in terms of numbers eligible to join, and to open up the beautiful Royal Arch Degree (and to ensure its survival!), a Degree of *Passing The Chair* was created, by which Master Masons could sit in the East and receive the Past Master’s grip and word, and be thereby eligible to receive the Royal Arch Degree. While many countries have replaced this requirement with a simpler one that Candidates only be Master Masons for a period of time prior to receiving it, this quaint relic of former times has been preserved in the York Rite as a precursor to receiving the Royal Arch Degree.

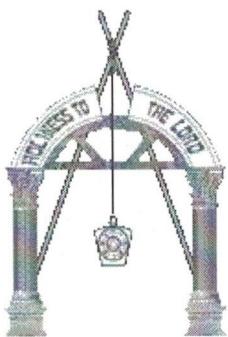


Figure 12 - Keystone being placed

The Degree also contains the word ‘virtual’, to emphasize the fact that, although the Brother has received the Word and Grip of Past Master, this is only as a prerequisite to his receiving the Royal Arch Degree, and in no way qualifies him to govern a regular Blue Lodge. It is quite possible – and not uncommon – for a Mason to be a Royal Arch Mason and a Virtual Past Master prior to being installed in the East in his Lodge and receiving the ‘Secrets of the Chair’ in that context.

It has been suggested by some scholars that the **Degree of Most Excellent Master** was originally part of a more elaborate ending to the Mark Degree, since it deals with the placing of the Keystone which

plays such a central part in that Degree. Nowadays it is an independent Degree whose subject is the completion of the Temple, and contains the unique Masonic action of removing one’s apron within the open Lodge room.

Finally, the **Degree of Holy Royal Arch** is the pinnacle of the Capitular System. In this complex and beautiful Degree, the Candidate is Exalted to become a Royal Arch Mason and becomes a Companion. He continues to be a Brother, of course, but the term Companion reminds

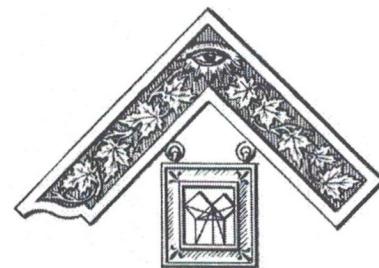


Figure 11 - Past Master's Jewel

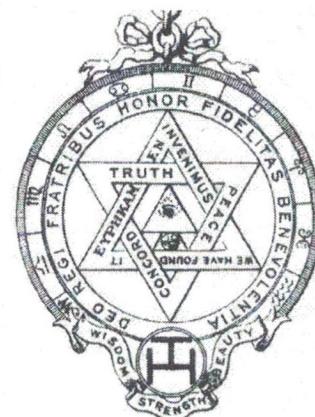


Figure 13 - English Royal Arch Jewel

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him that he is now considered to be in a closer relationship with his fellow travelers. Of course the singularly most important thing about this Degree is that he receives the True Word of a Master Mason.

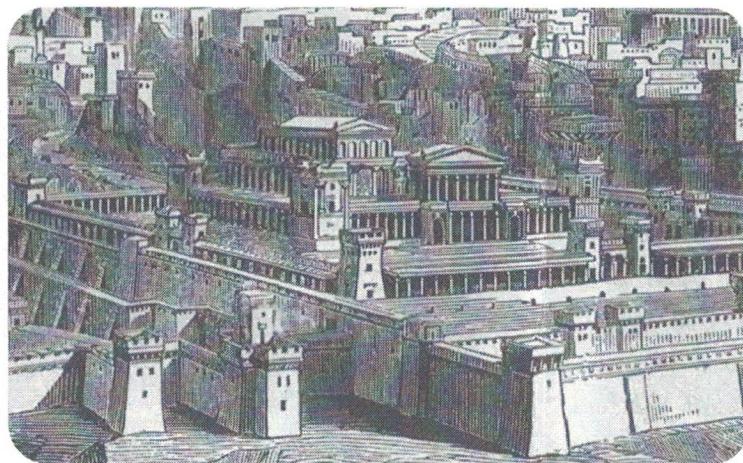


Figure 14 - King Solomon's Temple

### The Placing of the Degrees in the Ritual Timeline

The time periods covered by the Capitular Degrees largely follow those of the Blue Lodge Degrees. However, due to its dual nature, the first part of the Mark Degree actually takes place while the Candidate is still a Fellowcraft, which is indicated by the manner in which he wears his apron. In second part of the Degree he is once again clothed as a Master Mason, and the action takes place shortly after the death of Grand Master Hiram Abif.

The Virtual Past Master Degree follows, and reflects the Installation of a Master of a Lodge, which it is meant to emulate, although in a shortened manner. Remember the word and grip received as an Installed Master are not intended to replace the Substitute Grip and Word of Master Mason. It is a separate ceremony in itself which empowers the Master to rule his Lodge. In the United States the act of conferring the Master's Grip and Word upon a well-qualified Candidate for the Chair of King Solomon is called an Investiture, to emphasize the fact that it is not a new Degree in or of itself. However, the Degree of Virtual Past Master reflects the origins of the Degree, which in other countries, itself developed into an elaborate ceremony considered the equivalent of receiving another Degree, since it is sometimes conferred in a Board of Past Masters, with its own ceremonies, legend, obligations, several signs and the grip. And following this the regular members of the Lodge are readmitted, being informed that 'during their temporary absence, the Brother had been duly entrusted with the Secrets of the Chair and Installed as Master of his Lodge.'