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EDITED BY JOHN ELY BRIGGS

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Origins of Iowa Masonry

As a prelude to the consideration of the beginnings of Freemasonry in Iowa, a brief notation of the fraternity's course preceding its appearance in the Commonwealth will be not only useful but, to some degree, necessary. The existence of Freemasonry is asserted by tradition in times long before its attestation in historical documents. Those who ponder upon the logic and implications of the ancient legends sometimes think it not unreasonable to conclude that the true origins of the fraternity belong to that period before the dawn of history when men began to apply the rudiments of geometry in the construction of buildings, and to be conscious of the gracious fact of brotherhood. One of the most persistent legends within the historic period is that the erection of the great temple at Jerusalem during the reign of King Solomon was a Masonic achievement.

In the medieval guilds of master builders, modern Masons recognize their operative brethren.

It is well known that during the Middle Ages Masons were associated together in lodges for the preservation of the secrets of their trade skills and the enjoyment and practice of fraternity. The continuance of the order was assured by the careful selection of youths for instruction in the building arts. But with the coming of modern times the medieval craft guilds in general suffered progressive decline. It eventually became clear that some of them were being held together by fraternal ties after they had ceased to be operative organizations. With the loss of significance, the substance of their former vitality more and more yielded to repetitive formalism.

The year 1717 is an important one in the history of Freemasonry for at that time a few of the surviving lodges in London, England, met together to organize a Grand Lodge and revive the fainting craft. Inherent in this movement was a transition of the order from an operative to a speculative basis, as increasing numbers of men who had no thought of becoming operative masons were intrigued by the deepening esoteric qualities of the association. A new intellectual leadership appeared, and while many of the ancient landmarks and symbols were retained, the Masonic order, in the course of time, was completely converted into a moral and philosophic system.

As to the beginning of Masonry in English America, it is a reasonable suggestion that members of the fraternity crossed the Atlantic in seventeenth century ships. Undoubtedly Freemasons of the speculative sort were to be found in the colonies before subordinate lodges were authorized by the Grand Lodge. Some were set up without authorization, and it is interesting to note that Benjamin Franklin was made a Mason in such a lodge in Pennsylvania in 1731. The authentic establishment of Masonry in America, however, dates from June 5, 1730, when Daniel Coxe was empowered by the Grand Lodge of England as Provincial Grand Master of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. Four years later, Henry Price was commissioned Provincial Grand Master of New England. Following the American Revolution, the several Grand bodies in the independent States severed jurisdictional though not fraternal relations with the Grand Lodge of England.

Freemasonry made its appearance in Iowa during the 1830's. Members of the order were found in the wagons and on the boats that brought the vanguard of white men to the new land. Some were among the workers of the mining community at Dubuque. It is known that certain of these were made Masons in Far West Lodge at Galena,

Illinois, before any lodge existed in Iowa. Robert Lucas, the first Governor of Iowa Territory, and his secretary, Theodore S. Parvin, were both Masons, and their sympathy and assistance were highly important in giving Freemasonry authoritative establishment at Burlington, the newly-proclaimed capital.

What is reputed to be the first published word attesting the active existence of Freemasonry in Iowa was a notice appearing in the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* of November 5, 1840. It was a call for a meeting. "The regular members of the Masonic Fraternity of the Territory of Iowa are requested to meet in the rooms over the store of Ralston and Patterson, near the National Hotel, in the city of Burlington, on Wednesday evening next, 11th November, A. D. 1840, A. L. 5840 at 6 o'clock P. M."

Theodore S. Parvin read this notice with interest, and presented himself at the designated place. But there was no sign of life. No preparation for a gathering had been made. The doors were shut, the windows darkened. Was there confusion among the brethren? The record does not say, but on the following evening a group met at the carpenter shop of Evan Evans. The company, earnest and purposeful, was indeed representative of the varied body of speculative Masonry, being

composed of a merchant, a justice, a lawyer, a physician, a carpenter, a farmer, a miner, a landlord, a hotel steward, and a legislator or two.

At this historic meeting the pioneer Masons decided to apply to the Grand Lodge of Missouri for dispensation of authority to organize a lodge in Burlington. A petition was drafted by Brother William Thompson, patterned, probably, after a model found in "the only Masonic book accessible, . . . *Some of the Beauties of Freemasonry*, by Joshua Bradley, A. M., published in Rutland, Vermont, in 1816." Before Theodore S. Parvin forwarded it to the Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, it bore, in addition to his own name, the signatures of William Thompson, Hiram C. Bennett, Evan Evans, William Frye, Chauncey Swan, Thomas H. Curts, and Robert Lucas. During the two weeks which elapsed before a response was received, the eager brethren held several meetings for the purpose of instruction, and to practice the ceremonies of opening and closing lodge in the three degrees; also that the brethren, coming as they did from different jurisdictions, "might compare their work and adjust differences."

The eagerly awaited event occurred on November 29, 1840. On that day, a Sunday, the steamboat *Hudson* brought the coveted dispensa-

tion which bore the date of November 20, 1840. The delighted brethren lost no time in putting their new powers into effect. They assembled on the following evening and organized Burlington Lodge No. 41. The numbering was, of course, in the Missouri succession. Parvin wrote in his diary: "*First Lodge in the Territory of Iowa.*" The three principal officers were appointed by the Grand Lodge of Missouri: Hiram C. Bennett, Master; William Thompson, Senior Warden; and Evan Evans, Junior Warden. On October 20, 1841, the Grand Lodge of Missouri issued a formal charter to the lodge at Burlington. The name then used, however, was Des Moines Lodge, and as such it has been known ever since.

The second point of entrance for Masonry into Iowa was at Muscatine, or Bloomington, as it was then called. Some of the Masons in that town had been interested in the organization of the Burlington lodge. Moreover, Theodore S. Parvin became prosecuting attorney for the Second Judicial District and moved to Bloomington. His Masonic activities in Burlington had taught him how to proceed, and on Christmas day, 1840, by his advice, a notice was published in the Bloomington *Herald*: "There will be a meeting of Free and Accepted Masons at the home of Josiah Parvin [Theodore's father] on Wednesday, the 30th

inst., for the purpose of taking into consideration the formation of a lodge in this place. Members in good standing are respectfully invited to attend."

The surviving record of this meeting is not as extensive as the comparable one at Burlington. It is obvious, however, that a petition to the Grand Lodge of Missouri for a dispensation was agreed upon, and that following its dispatch, the hopeful brothers were assembled on several occasions for study, instruction, and practice. The superior body of Missouri was quick to respond, and the important parchment, dated February 4, 1841, was received on February 12th. Parvin had the distinction of having signed the first two petitions for dispensations issuing from Iowa Territory, and of being a member of the two initial lodges, although it was necessary for him to demit from the Burlington group before he could be admitted at Bloomington. Iowa Lodge No. 42 was actually organized on Monday, February 15, 1841. The Grand Lodge appointed Ansel Humphreys, Master; John Lilly, Jr., Senior Warden; and B. S. Olds, Junior Warden. Theodore S. Parvin, who had been Junior Deacon at Burlington, was elected Senior Deacon at Bloomington, and Josiah Parvin, his father, was elected Treasurer.

Within a few weeks this lodge was ambitiously

concerned about securing a building for a permanent home. The arrangement it eventually made was unique. After negotiations with the officers of the Episcopalian congregation, it was agreed that the Masons would build a second story on the building being erected by the church group. This was done in 1841, and Iowa Lodge continued to occupy this first Masonic building in the Territory until 1854.

Dubuque, which was the earliest home of Masons in Iowa, did not long delay in forming a lodge. Among those prominent in the order there was James Smith, a Past Grand Master of New Hampshire, and it may well be supposed that he exerted a directive influence upon his brethren. One of the factors quickening the decision to effect an organization of Dubuque Masons seems to have been a deepening concern about certain lawless elements that had drifted into the diggings. Being lovers of law and order they came more and more to feel that the community would be benefited from the establishment of a lodge.

It was on July 18, 1842, that a small group of Masons gathered for a meeting in the Shakespeare House, a rude building used as a theater, owned and operated by Timothy Fanning who was also an alderman of the town. Fanning was present at the meeting. So was George W. Cummins

who, as the first sheriff of Dubuque County, had been called upon to execute two condemned men. James Smith was among those attending and, because of his previous distinguished position in New Hampshire, was requested to preside at the meeting. The result of this gathering was a decision to request a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Missouri making possible the organization of a lodge in Dubuque. Named in the petition as the three principal officers-elect were Timothy Fanning, Master; George W. Cummins, Senior Warden; and Narcissus Nadeau, Junior Warden. All three were members of Far West Lodge of Galena.

Favorable action was taken by the Missouri jurisdiction, and the dispensation was signed on October 10, 1842. The lodge was speedily organized on October 21, 1842, in the Shakespeare House, though afterward it met over the drug store of Brother Timothy Mason. Exactly a year later, the Letters of Dispensation were surrendered and a charter was received by Dubuque Lodge No. 62 bearing the date of October 10, 1843.

This review of the origins of Freemasonry in Iowa may be concluded with the organization of one more lodge, at Iowa City, since it was these four groups that united to achieve the creation of

the Grand Lodge of Iowa. Following what had become customary procedure, a notice appeared in the *Iowa Capitol Reporter*, on January 8, 1842, calling all "Brethren of the Mystic Tie" to meet for the purpose of seeking a dispensation to establish a lodge. The gathering, which assembled at "candle lighting time" on January 13th, in "Doc" William Reynolds's schoolroom, directed William Reynolds, William B. Snyder, and Abraham I. Willis to draw up and dispatch the petition to the Grand Lodge of Missouri. Though the application was made about six months earlier than that of the Dubuque Masons, the dispensation was granted to Iowa City Lodge No. 63 at the same time, October 10, 1842, and a year later to the day, this was replaced by a charter, as at Dubuque.

On December 9, 1842, nine master Masons assembled to exercise the permission of the dispensation. Among those present in addition to Reynolds, Snyder, and Willis, were James R. Hartsock and Chauncey Swan. The work of establishing the lodge was performed in due and ancient form. William Reynolds had been named Master of the lodge in the dispensation, which also designated William B. Snyder as the first Senior Warden, and Abraham I. Willis as Junior Warden. All were leaders in the new capital of

the Territory. Reynolds, English born and a Boston schoolmaster, was pioneering in education and active in organizing the Methodist Church; Snyder, a contractor from Cincinnati, built the first Iowa City courthouse, the Methodist Church, and superintended construction work on the capitol in 1842; and Willis was prominent in organizing the Iowa City Manufacturing Company and other business enterprises. Chauncey Swan had helped locate the site of Iowa City and served as commissioner to lay out the town, sell lots, and build the capitol.

The most aggressive member of the Iowa City Masonic circle was James R. Hartsock. Born in Pennsylvania he had come to Burlington in 1838 at the age of twenty. There he was made a Mason, being the first candidate to receive the degrees in Iowa. He participated in fraternal activities with such enthusiasm that he presently became Senior Deacon and in 1842 was sent as a delegate to the Grand Lodge of Missouri. For his share in organizing the Iowa City lodge he was chosen as first Senior Deacon, but he was a disruptive influence among his brethren. Upon a charge of unmasonic conduct in connection with a petition for the establishment of a chapter of Royal Arch Masons at Iowa City, the District Deputy Grand Master of Missouri, Ansel Humphreys, ordered

the Worshipful Master of the Iowa City lodge to arrest Hartsock's Senior Deacon's jewel. It has been alleged that in a fit of anger Hartsock tore from the record book the notations of proceedings of the Iowa City lodge during the period it operated under dispensation. That he eventually made peace with his brethren is evident, because his Senior Deacon's jewel was restored; he served as Master of his lodge in Iowa City in 1857, 1863, 1871, and 1872; and was elected Grand Master of Masons in Iowa for the year 1858-59.

These were the four Iowa lodges which, even before all were finally chartered, began to plan a Grand Lodge for Iowa. The leaders in Burlington, Bloomington, Dubuque, and Iowa City joined in the project of establishing a separate jurisdiction.

HARRISON JOHN THORNTON