

*There are those who believe that Freemasonry originated with the very beginning of civilization. However, there is no absolute basis for such a belief. We do know that as time and experience proved certain truths, these truths were taken and carried to the thinking people of the various tribes. We do know, also, that in several of the ancient civilizations there existed certain mystic societies; that these mystic societies had a Lodge form, with Lodge officers, all similar in character and all teaching moral living. Thus it might rightfully be supposed that the ideals and teachings of our Order have come to us from the learning and wisdom of the dim past.*

While we refer to ourselves as "Freemasons," the accepted term for hundreds of years was simply "Masons." Defined, Mason means "Builder." Starting some 800 years ago, and lasting nearly 400 years, was the era during which were built in Western Europe the hundreds of great Gothic cathedrals. Many of these immense structures still stand as a memorial of the past and as an inspiration to the people of today.

To us, it is almost incomprehensible that these magnificent cathedrals were built completely by hand, with only the simplest of tools. The credit goes to the Builders, or Masons, of that era. It was their ingenuity, imagination, resourcefulness and industry which produced these monuments.

To accomplish what they did, these Masons banded themselves together into Workmen's Guilds. These Guilds formed into Lodges, with regular Lodge officers and each with three levels of membership. The first level of members was 'apprentices', or bearers of burdens, who carried the material for the skilled workmen. The second level was composed of the craftsmen, or 'fellows' - the skilled workmen on the Temples. The third and highest level was the 'masters', who were the overseers and superintendents on the building project. The Guilds taught, and required of their membership, certain attributes of moral conduct. Also, specific skills and proficiencies were required before a man could pass from one level, or degree, to the next. It was these Guild Lodges that actually gave birth to modern Masonic Lodges and to present-day Freemasonry.

We refer to these Guild Masons as "Operative" Masons, because they actually operated as and performed as working masons in the building of the cathedrals. However, during the sixteenth century the decline of the Gothic cathedral building began, and with it a decline in the size and strength of the Guild Lodges. For two hundred years these Lodges struggled and fought for their very existence. During this struggle some of the Lodges, to preserve themselves, began taking in "non-operative" members -- that is, men of high moral character, but not necessarily members of the builders' trade. These non-operative members were referred to as "Accepted" Masons and later as "Speculative" Masons. Eventually the Guild Lodges came to be known as "Speculative Lodges." This was particularly true in the British Isles, where a considerable number of men in all walks of life were admitted to membership in the Lodges of Freemasons.