

Freemasonry in Mississippi: Ancient, or Modern?

Not too long after a man in Mississippi is raised, or even perhaps before that time, he wonders about the differences in the way the names of Grand Lodges are styled. He learns that in Mississippi we style our Grand Lodge as the “Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Mississippi”. However, he quickly discovers that many other jurisdictions add another word, Ancient. And, in time, he may even hear it told that, once upon a time, Mississippi itself used that term. He cannot help but wonder what the term Ancient truly means and why Mississippi may or may not have ever used it. To understand this, we must first take a glimpse at the beginnings of Accepted Freemasons.

Free & Accepted

It is important to take just a moment to reflect on the words Free and Accepted. These terms describe two different types of Masons. Regarding the Free-mason, the most substantive evidence supports the view that it referred to hewers and setters of freestone – that stone capable of being tooled in any direction.¹ These, in part, are the stone mason guilds in the United Kingdom that we trace our roots to. As early as 1630 some men were admitted into these guilds who were not free-stone masons. These men, of a more non-laboring gentleman class, were dubbed Accepted Masons. These Accepted Masons were involved in what we now more commonly term as Speculative Freemasonry.²

Early Division

It is generally accepted that the first Grand Lodge was formed at London in 1717. Typically called the “Premier Grand Lodge of England”, it was founded as the “Grand Lodge of London and Westminster”, but commonly became known as the “Grand Lodge of England.” Four lodges participated in this formation, which were each named after the building in which they met. They were: Goose and Gridiron Ale-house (now called Lodge of Antiquity No. 2), Crown Ale-house, Apple-Tree Tavern (now called Lodge of Fortitude and Old Cumberland No. 12), and Rummer and Grapes Tavern (now called Royal Somerset House and Inverness Lodge No. IV).

Too often it is presumed that these lodges were the only ones in existence at the time. Locally, this assumption may be in part due to Harmony, Andrew Jackson, and Washington Lodges being the only lodges within the boundaries of the State of Mississippi at the time of the formation of the Grand Lodge of Mississippi. However, that was not the case in England. Many other lodges did exist, and several of them took offense to this new Grand Lodge assuming any higher authority than their own independent authority. In 1725 two other Grand Lodges were formed, The Grand Lodge of Ireland and The Grand Lodge of all of England held at York. In 1736 The Grand Lodge of Scotland was formed. There was, for a time, also a Grand Lodge of England South of the River Trent.³ Yet, still, the Grand Lodge of England was the most prominent Grand Lodge in Great Britain.

¹ Ill. Arturo de Hoyos, 33°, Grand Cross, Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor & Guide, p80

² Ill. Arturo de Hoyos, 33°, Grand Cross, Scottish Rite Ritual Monitor & Guide, p81-82

³ W.B. Aubrey Newman, Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076

Here, at the very foundation of what we consider to be Freemasonry today, cracks began to form. Presumptive authority and many things related to the by-laws of the fraternity, were called into question.

Enter the Ancients

In 1751, six lodges joined together to form “The Most Ancient and Honourable Society of Free & Accepted Masons.” These lodges had a complex history, being stationed around London, but being of an Irish constitution. It is believed that, because the members were not wealthy and did not practice the English degrees, they were shunned from the lodges of the Grand Lodge of England.¹ As such, this new Grand Lodge denounced the Grand Lodge of England, accusing them of having adopted dubious plans and departing from the landmarks. This new Grand Lodge laid claim to being rooted in the old forms and classified themselves as being “Ancient Masons”. To further drive home their point they also took to calling the members of the Grand Lodge of England as “Moderns”.

While the Moderns continued to thrive in major cities and in British Territories around the world, the Ancients succeeded in establishing lodges in more humble, rural areas, as well as being more supportive of the foundation of military lodges.

Quite a lot has been written about the 60 years of division between the Moderns and Ancients. Generally, organizational difficulties ensued that called into question the capabilities of those leading the Premier Grand Lodge. These difficulties led to changes in the modes of recognition in hopes of shoring up the challenges presented by the numerous exposés being printed at the time. Other changes that called the Primer Grand Lodge into question include: No right to participate in processions, no right to Initiate and Pass a candidate on the same day, being more religiously universal by shying away from Christian-themed degrees, such as the Royal Arch degree of the time, abbreviating lectures, not reciting the ancient charges at Initiations, only the Tiler wearing a sword, lack of an esoteric Master installation ceremony – the Ancients requiring the Royal Arch as a prerequisite – and many others.

Alterations such as these were “regarded by many of its own members, and by the whole of masons outside its organization, as a grievous and wholly improper interference with a landmark purporting to date from time immemorial.”²

The amount of tension between the Moderns and Ancients can perhaps be best summarized by this statement of the Grand Lodge of England in 1777: “The persons calling themselves ancient masons are not to be countenanced or acknowledged as masons by any regular lodge or mason under the constitution of England. Nor shall any regular mason be present at any of their conventions. Neither shall any person Initiated at these irregular meetings be admitted into any lodge without being remade and pay the usual making fee.”³ By this, it is clear that both grand lodges considered the other irregular.

¹ W.B. Aubrey Newman, Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076

² “Ancients and Moderns”, Brother Gene, mastermason.com

³ W.B. Aubrey Newman, Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076

Here in America, Freemasonry had been spreading rapidly, and that only adds to the confusion. The first Grand Lodges formed in the United States were both Provincial Grand Lodges, under authority from the Grand Lodge of England, or the Moderns. Individual Lodges began declaring their allegiance to either the Moderns or the Ancients, based on whatever communication they could secure from England. While class separated some lodges, in many cases, one could draw a line to say that those lodges whose men were loyal to the crown were Moderns, while those with a more revolutionary mindset could be found in Ancient lodges.¹ This becomes increasingly complicated when we consider Grand Lodges such as that of Massachusetts, which was indubitably chartered under authority of the Grand Lodge of England, the Moderns, yet which ultimately assumed the name of The Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, after having merged in 1792 with the Ancients in that area.

When the United States of American achieved its independence, many lodges found themselves no longer under any authority. Few, such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts, declare that their authority comes from a charter out of the United Kingdom. Instead, most lodges, like America itself, declared themselves as independent, and formed new Grand Lodges related to the boundaries of their various states.

While there were many disparities between the Ancient and Modern Grand Lodges, this separation was solved in 1813. One key agreement needing to be made was which degrees their lodges were permitted to perform. The moderns would argue that only the first three degrees were permissible, while the ancients would argue that the Holy Royal Arch was indispensable, and the summit of ancient masonry. Some legal wording was used to solve this, citing in their treaty that Freemasonry only involved the first three degrees, and the Royal Arch Degree.² Apparently, when it comes to finding commonality with your Brethren, four can at times be the same as three.

Where does this leave Mississippi? With the United Grand Lodge of England formed in 1813, eliminating their so-called ancient grand lodge, and Mississippi being chartered in 1818, surely it is clear that Mississippi would not call their Grand Lodge with this now defunct “ancient” terminology.

Yet the record is muddled. It would seem reasonable to presume that all we need to do is review the record of the founding of the Grand Lodge. In the “Proceedings of the Conventions for the Establishment of a Grand Lodge, for The State of Mississippi.” It reads:

Pursuant to certain resolutions of Harmony Lodge No. 33, unanimously concurred in by Andrew Jackson Lodge No. 15, and Washington Lodge No. 17, a convention for the purpose of establishing a Grand Lodge of Ancient Masons in the State of Mississippi; and agreeably to previous notice, the Masters and Wardens of said Lodges, and Past-Masters,

¹ W.B. Aubrey Newman, Past Master of Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076

² Christopher Hodapp, 33, Freemasonry for Dummies

convened at the city of Natchez, on Monday the twenty-seventh day of July, A. L. 5818, when the following delegates and brethren appeared in Convention¹

Therein we see the statement of the establishment of a Grand Lodge of Ancient Masons. Case closed? Hardly.

To begin the confusing of the matter here in Mississippi, the constitution of the Grand Lodge reads: "The Grand Lodge of the State of Mississippi", nothing further. In no instance in the constitution is F. & A. M. or A. F. & A. M. mentioned.

The proceedings of the annual communication of our Grand Lodge have used different headings through the years. From its inception in 1818 to 1849 the proceedings are found labeled as "Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of The State of Mississippi," as well as "Proceedings of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of the State of Mississippi", without any mention of F. & A. M., or A. F. & A. M. Yet, in 1850 the title was changed to read "Proceedings of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of the State of Mississippi of Ancient Free and Accepted Masons." However, throughout the 1850 reports the Grand Lodge is never referred to as Ancient, but only as the Grand Lodge of Mississippi. Further, the Grand Lodge used the same printer in both 1849 and 1850, seemingly eliminating a printer's mistake from the realm of explanations.

Interestingly, the proceedings of our Grand Lodge for 1850 include the notice that a renewed effort was emerging for the formation of a General Grand Lodge for the United States and included a copy of the constitution being proposed to govern said General Grand Lodge. In here we find that the full name being proposed for the General Grand Lodge was "The General Grand Lodge of Antient Free and Accepted York Masons, for the United States of America." While these constitutions were not adopted by Mississippi, it is interesting to see it included here during the year when the proceedings seem to erroneously begin to title the Grand Lodge as Ancient Free and Accepted Masons.

The use of this additional wording continued through 1897. Then, in 1898 the proceedings record the Grand Lodge as the "Grand Lodge of Mississippi, of Free and Accepted Masons", and it has remained so until today, 120 years later. But, why?

Thankfully some measure of explanation can be found in the 1898 proceedings. For better or worse, all questions seem to eventually find their way to the Law and Jurisprudence Committee. Such was the case regarding the very name of our Grand Lodge and its Subordinate Lodges, 80 years after our foundation.

Page 69 of the Proceedings of the Grand Lodge for 1898 records the 33rd question the Law and Jurisprudence Committee received for the year, which was given the simple heading of "NAME." It reads: "What is the legal and proper designation of a Lodge under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Mississippi-Ancient Free and Accepted Masons, or Free and Accepted Masons. We are about to deed some property and want to correctly describe the Lodge."

¹ Proceedings of the Convention for the Establishment of a Grand Lodge, for The State of Mississippi

The answer is: “The legal designation of a Lodge and of the Grand Lodge, is ‘Free and Accepted Masons.’ Although this Grand Lodge is descended from both the Ancients and the Moderns of England and from the Grand Lodges of Scotland and Ireland through the Grand Lodges of Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts, some of whom are entitled ‘The Ancient and Honorable Fraternity of Free and Accepted Masons,’ it has always styled itself by the simpler title of ‘Free and Accepted Masons,’ and it is by that title that it is incorporated under the laws of this State. A deed by a Lodge should be written; ‘Vicksburg Lodge No. 26, Free and Accepted Masons, holding under the Grand Lodge of the State of Mississippi, incorporated by act of the Legislature of the State of Missis[s]ippi, approved April 10, 1871.’”¹

And, so it is. The legal name of our Grand Lodge is the “Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the State of Mississippi.”²

It may be that the intent of the founders of the Grand Lodge of Mississippi may never be known. The resolution between the wording in the convention to establish the Grand Lodge, the constitution for the Grand Lodge, and its first recorded proceedings may well never be found. Nor has any evidence yet to be uncovered to explain the sudden changing to our records that made it appear as if the Grand Lodge of Mississippi ever styled itself as Ancient Free and Accepted Masons.

Whatever the case, it is clear that Freemasonry today was greatly influenced by both sides of the debate between the Ancients and Moderns. “Had the rival Grand Lodge never been formed, English freemasonry to-day would be the poorer, and not one of our Craft degrees would be as it is.”³ It seems highly improbable that any lodge could lay claim to following only one method or the other, though it is also clear that much of what the Ancients promoted remains in our Craft today.

So, when you are asked if Mississippi is F. & A. M. or A. F. & A. M., the answer is most assuredly F. & A. M. And, if asked about the nearly 50 years where our proceedings are titled as A. F. & A. M., assure the brother that there is no evidence showing that the name of the grand lodge was ever changed, and it is best to presumed that the title is a clerical error, until further evidence can be discovered, though the influence of the ancients is still clearly visible today, over 200 years later.

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¹ Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Mississippi, 1898

² Laws of Mississippi, Chapter CCI, 1871

³ “Ancients and Moderns”, Brother Gene, mastermason.com