

Early History of the York Rite in Texas

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Although membership in the Masonic fraternity has been declining since the early 1960's, the 1999 Proceedings of the Grand Lodge of Texas reported over 134 thousand Masons (134,477) in good standing in Texas. Yet, at the same time, there were only about 17 thousand of those same Masons who were members of the Texas York Rite Bodies, or about 12 ½% of the Masonic population. Of course, we could expound for hours about the many reasons why there aren't more Texas Masons in the York Rite, but I think the discussion would eventually lead us to one glaring conclusion. We, as Masons, and particularly York Rite Masons, do not know very much about our York Rite heritage in this state.

Masonic scholars have done a good job of piecing together the obscure historical threads of the oldest fraternity in the world. When we talk to a non-Mason about our fraternity, we can't help but feel a spark of pride when we tell him about some of the more famous members of our Masonic family, such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, the Marquis de Lafayette, Andrew Jackson, Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman and many others. Most of us are very familiar with the key role that Masonry played in giving birth to the Republic of Texas. We feel honored to be associated with such Masons as Stephen F. Austin, Sam Houston, Mirabeau B. Lamar, James Fannin, William B. Travis, James Bowie and David Crockett, some of whom paid the ultimate price to uphold and preserve the principles that are the foundation of our Masonic beliefs.

Despite all of this, however, we suddenly find ourselves at a loss for words when we attempt to explain to a brother Mason about the benefits of York Rite membership and the beautiful lessons illustrated by the Degrees. We have no historical background in our memory that we can call upon to explain our existence. In attempting to do some research on the subject, one can see why this condition of historical ignorance exists. To date, there has been very little written about the beginnings of the York Rite in America, and almost nothing at all about Texas York Rite Masonry. However, an examination of the early proceedings of the Grand Chapter and Grand Council of Texas reveals some interesting and surprising facts.

To place events in their proper perspective, it is important to look at several key historical events, both Masonic and political, in Texas history. Early in 1832 the arrest of William B. Travis and two other Masons by Mexican military authorities near Anahuac triggered a conflict, which is considered to be the beginning of the Texas Revolution. As political events surrounding the Texas struggle for independence began to unfold, the seeds of Texas Masonry were beginning to take root as well. In March of 1835 the now famous meeting under the oak tree at Brazoria was held, in which several prominent Masons, including Anson Jones, agreed to request a dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana to form a Lodge in Texas. The Dispensation was granted by John Henry Holland,

then Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana, and on December 27, 1835, Holland Lodge No. 36 was instituted and opened in the second story of the old courthouse building in Brazoria. A month later, on January 29, 1836, Holland Lodge No. 36 was granted a Charter by the Grand Lodge of Louisiana with Anson Jones designated as the first Worshipful Master. John M. Allen of Louisiana Lodge No. 32 delivered the Charter personally to Anson Jones just prior to the Battle of San Jacinto. On December 9, 1835, three weeks prior to the first meeting of Holland Lodge in Brazoria, a Charter was granted by the General Grand Chapter of the United States to San Felipe de Austin Royal Arch Chapter No. 1 to form and meet at San Felipe de Austin. However, due to unforeseen events, the Chapter was never opened there. Because of events surrounding the Texas revolution, it was almost two years before Holland Lodge No. 36 was able to hold another meeting.

On March 2, 1836, at a Convention assembled at Washington-on-the-Brazos, a Declaration of Independence was drawn up and signed, declaring Texas' independence from Mexico. Two days later, on March 4, 1836, a Constitution of the Republic of Texas was drafted and an ad interim government created and installed with David G. Burnet as the first President. Sam Houston was also elected commander-in-chief of all Texas land forces. While this Convention was in session the Alamo was under siege by the Mexican army under Santa Anna. Two days after the ad interim government was formed, the Alamo fell, on March 6, 1836, and its defenders were massacred. On April 21, 1836, one and a half months after the historic stand by the Texas defenders at the Alamo, Sam Houston, commanding an army of 783 Texans and volunteers, won the decisive Battle at San Jacinto against Santa Anna and a Mexican army numbering well over 1200 men. Santa Anna himself was captured the next day and held as prisoner until the end of the Texas conflict a few months later. On September 1, 1836 a general election was held, Sam Houston was elected President and the Constitution of the Republic of Texas was ratified. It is interesting to note that in 1835 there were only about 300 Masons in Texas. Although Masons comprised less than two percent of the total population, they came to occupy over 41% of the seats in the Senate, 47% in the House of Representatives, 88% of the chief executive offices, and 60% of the principal judicial offices in the first constitutional government of the Republic of Texas. Texas remained a sovereign Republic for only nine years, until it was annexed to the United States of America on December 29, 1845.

Due to the many tasks at hand for the new Republic of Texas, it was another year before Masonry saw any prominent activity. In late August or early September of 1837 McFarland Lodge No. 41 at San Augustine was set to work under dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana. Their Charter, dated September 22, 1837, was received some time later. At the same time, Milam Lodge No. 40 at Nacogdoches was issued a Charter with the same date from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana. A little over a month later, on November 8, 1837, Holland Lodge No. 36, with Anson Jones as Worshipful Master, reconvened in Houston for the first time since its original meeting at Brazoria. On December 20, 1837, representatives of Holland Lodge No. 36, Milam Lodge No. 40 and McFarland Lodge No. 41 met in convention in Houston to establish the Grand Lodge of Texas. The convention elected Anson Jones the first Grand Master, a committee was appointed to draw up a constitution, and the first meeting of the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas was called to meet at Houston on April 16, 1838, at which time the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana was ended.

Prior to the formation of the Grand Chapter of Texas, Chapters of Royal Arch Masons were formed and operated as Masonic Bodies appendant to a Blue Lodge and under the sanction and jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas. On June 2, 1840, San Felipe de Austin Chapter, having never met at San Felipe de Austin, met and opened a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons at

Galveston, Texas. The General Grand Chapter of the United States, from whom they had obtained their Charter, did not grant approval for the removal to Galveston until September 12, 1844, some four years later. Meanwhile, in 1841, Cyrus Chapter at Matagorda, Rising Star Chapter at San Augustine and Lone Star Chapter at Austin petitioned for dispensations from the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas, and on December 10, 1841 those dispensations were granted. Four days later, on December 14, 1841, representatives of those Chapters, along with those of Washington Chapter No. 2 in Houston, met in Convention in Austin to form the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of the Republic of Texas. One week later, on December 21, 1841, a Constitution was ratified and adopted. However, San Felipe de Austin Chapter refused to sign the Constitution and withdrew from the Convention. Upon receipt of a letter informing them of the formation of the Grand Chapter and requesting relinquishment of jurisdiction over local Chapters and Royal Arch Masons, the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas adopted a resolution surrendering said jurisdiction and granting recognition to the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of the Republic of Texas as the appropriate head and governing body of Texas Capitular Masonry. However, the General Grand Chapter of the United States refused to recognize the legal authority of the Grand Chapter of Texas. The differences between the two governing bodies were never satisfactorily resolved and in 1847, six years after the formation of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Texas, the General Grand Chapter passed a resolution forbidding Masonic intercourse between any Chapters and Royal Arch Masons under its jurisdiction, and those of the Grand Chapter of Texas.

Two years later, in 1849, in an attempt to preserve peace and harmony among the craft, the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Texas adopted a resolution to dissolve itself. During all of this confusion, eight of the nine Chapters of Texas petitioned for dispensations from the General Grand Chapter to open their Chapters under authority and jurisdiction of the General Grand Chapter of the United States. These dispensations were granted between 1848 to 1850 and six of the eight Chapters subsequently received Charters. One year after dissolving itself, representatives from four Texas Chapters met in Galveston, on December 30, 1850, to again form the Grand Chapter of Texas, but this time under authority of the General Grand Chapter of the United States. All but San Felipe de Austin agreed to surrender their authority from the General Grand Chapter and place it under the Grand Chapter of Texas. Charters from the reinstated Grand Chapter of Texas were granted on June 25, 1851. San Felipe de Austin Chapter did not receive a Charter from the Grand Chapter of Texas until June 22, 1860. On June 17, 1861, no doubt precipitated by the cessation of the state of Texas from the Union during the Civil War, the Grand Chapter of Texas adopted a resolution permanently dissolving any connection with the General Grand Chapter of the United States. This dissolution remains to this day.

The Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Texas was born from a Convention held on June 24, 1856 in Huntsville, Texas, just 18 years after the first meeting of the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas. Representatives from Houston Council No. 10 (chartered from New York), Austin Council No. 12 (chartered from Alabama), Galveston Council (granted a dispensation from Alabama), and Coleman Council (located in Marshall, Texas; chartered from Kentucky) were present. It is interesting to note that Companion Andrew Neill, who was elected as the first Grand Recorder, was also a Charter member of the Grand Lodge of the Republic of Texas. In the period from 1857 to 1860 the Grand Council of Texas enjoyed a healthy growth, having issued 14 Charters to Councils in Texas and 1 Charter to Marysville Council in California. It seems that events leading up to the Civil War began to take their toll on Grand Council activities from 1861 to 1864, as reflected in Grand Council proceedings. Finally, at the Grand Assembly of the Grand

Council of Royal and Select Masters of Texas held in Houston on June 16, 1864, a resolution was adopted by the representatives present to dissolve the Grand Council, and to transfer jurisdiction of the Council Degrees, subordinate Councils and their members, and all funds and properties of the Grand Council of Texas to the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Texas. The existing Councils were then made appendant bodies of Royal Arch Chapters in Texas. Later, in the years following 1877, the action of the Grand Council of Texas to dissolve itself was followed in kind in eight other states, namely Mississippi, Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Wisconsin, Iowa, South Carolina, and North Carolina. However, after a few years trial, it was in every instance abandoned, and jurisdiction released by the Grand Chapters and resumed by the Grand Councils.

During the 43 years following the demise of the Grand Council of Texas, Cryptic Masonry experienced a steady growth under the jurisdiction of the Grand Chapter, eventually establishing appendant Councils for each of the more than 203 Chapters of Royal Arch Masons in Texas. By 1907, of the nearly 12,000 Royal Arch Masons then in Texas, almost all had become Royal and Select Masters. Despite this phenomenal growth, the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons, in its Annual Convocation at Waco, Texas, on December 3, 1907, adopted a resolution requesting that the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Texas should reconvene and again take jurisdiction over the Degrees of Royal and Select Master. On that same day a Convention of Royal and Select Masters, attended by representatives of 120 Texas Councils, was held at Waco, Texas, when it was decided to comply with the request of the Grand Chapter. A resolution was subsequently adopted by the delegates in attendance establishing rehabilitation of the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Texas. As of this writing it has continued to operate in peace and prosperity for 94 years since rehabilitation. I pray that it, and all of Texas York Rite Masonry, will continue to prosper, but only through the hard work and persistent efforts of dedicated Masons such as you here today can it do so. May God bless you in your efforts. Thank you.

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