

# From Acre to America

## The Introduction of the Masonic Order of St. Thomas of Acon into the United States of America

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On June 9, 1999, in a small Masonic Lodge room in the Nepean, Ontario, a spontaneous conversation between two English Masonic brethren, Keith Ansell ( *Sir Keith of March*) and David Price (*Sir David of Ful Wode*) and Reese Harrison and me , would change the course of Masonic relationships in the appendant orders between England and the United States in the most unforeseen and fundamental ways. The occasion was a meeting of the St. Lawrence Seaway Assemblage of the Worshipful Society of Free Masons, Rough Masons, Wallers, Slaters, Paviers, Plasterers and Bricklayers (hereinafter “the Operatives”) where Reese Harrison and I were attending to receive the I - IV Degrees.

It was late in the morning session, most likely between the II and III degrees, that I was speaking with Keith Ansell (at the time, unbeknownst to me, serving as Deputy Grand Marshal of the Order of St Thomas of Acon ) and to whom I was relating the conversation I had with Bro. Bill Box, at Mark Masons Hall in 1992, when I was first invited to join the Operatives. When Box presented me with a petition for the Operatives, I was uncertain as to whether it was a legitimate Masonic Order in the eyes of the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and deferred responding for seven years. <sup>1</sup> Keith, being a very knowledgeable and enthusiastic Mason with extensive experience in some of the smaller, lesser known private Orders within the Craft, immediately called over David Price to join us. They asked me if I had ever heard of the Order of St. Thomas of Acon and, after having confessed I did not, began to explain its historical significance, as the only English order of chivalry which fought in the Crusades.

Not wishing to repeat experience with the Operatives in 1992, I inquired about the possibility of American Knights Templar, under the Jurisdiction of the Grand Encampment of United States of America, becoming members and was told that they saw no reason why we would not be

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<sup>1</sup> More about this facet of the story will be covered in the author’s forthcoming monograph titled, “The Ambassadors”, detailing the introduction of many of the smaller Masonic orders into the United States of America.

enthusiastically welcomed. Serendipitously, being aware that Reese Harrison, who was then serving as the Governor General of the York Rite Sovereign College of North America<sup>2</sup>, was planning a trip in October 1999, I immediately invited him to join our conversation. After discussion, it was decided that this would be an opportune time to introduce Americans to St. Thomas and, given Reese's national eminence within American masonry, this would be a great springboard for the introduction of the Order to the United States of America.

Upon leaving Canada, Reese immediately embarked upon making the necessary plans to include initiation into the Order of St. Thomas of Acon for those traveling with him in October 1999. Simultaneously, as I was uncertain that I could travel with the Harrison delegation in October, I communicated with Secretary John W. Mitchell, KC and submitted my Petition to join the Order.

On October 23, 1999, as a part of an enjoyable, whirlwind Masonic itinerary<sup>3</sup> through England, the following brethren we admitted to Blackheath Chapel, TI (listed in numerical order on the roster of the Grand Masters Council UK):

Sir Matthew of Philadelphia	Matthew David Dupee
Sir Thomas of Houston	Thomas Barnes Johnson*
Sir Reese of Bexar	Reese Lenwood Harrison, Jr.
Sir Bryan of Lewisburg	Bryan Lee Berry
Sir Fred of Mount Pleasant	Fred E Allen
Sir Thomas of Mifflinburg	Thomas John Reimensnyder
Sir Andre of Byron	Andre Ernest Lovas
Sir John of Milton	John Ammon Brouse
Sir Robert of Columbus	Robert Roy Neff
Sir Robert of Sabine	Robert Paul Walker
Sir John of Groveport	John Andrew Busic
Sir Jack of Port Lavaca	Jack E. Beeler
Sir John of Clintwood	John Boyd Kendrick

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<sup>2</sup> Among his many leadership roles, Reese also went on to serve as Most Worshipful Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Texas (2004-5)

<sup>3</sup> On this date, with dispensation granted by Reese Harrison in his capacity as Governor General, a select group of qualified Masons were admitted into the York Rite Sovereign College of North America in an abbreviated ceremony.

Immediately upon return from United Kingdom, Reese Harrison, having explored with the Grand Master, Barry Clarke, KH, (*Sir Barry of Ilford*) the possibility of setting up Chapels of the Order in the United States, contacted [who?] to discuss his proposed plan to establish two chapels: one comprised of Knights Templar who resided in the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction for the Scottish Rite and the other composed of those who resided in the Southern Jurisdiction. The rationale for this apportionment of jurisdiction was to create a large enough pool of candidates to create viable Chapels, while simultaneously avoiding allowing either jurisdiction to dominate the future development of the Order in the United States. The latter concern was especially important since all of the initial candidates, with the exception of Andre Lovas from Georgia, came from the jurisdictions of Texas and Pennsylvania.

Despite my personal reservations about moving so quickly, Reese, with indefatigable energy and persuasion, convinced me that we needed to do this sooner rather than later while we had the permission and the enthusiasm for the introduction of a new Order into the United States<sup>4</sup>. With the introduction of St. Thomas of Acon in 2000, the last order that was introduced from a foreign jurisdiction since the introduction of many of the "Masonic week" organizations in the 1930's.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps, most significantly, Reese suggested Andre Lovas to serve as the Secretary of both Chapels so that we would have a solitary conduit through which to communicate with the Grand Master's Council in England, as well as to ensure uniformity of practice as the Order developed in the United States. In the succeeding years, having become an expert on the ritual, custom and practices of the Order through his long-standing dedicated service, Andre was recognized as both the Primus Grand Preceptor of our Province and the Primus Grand Master when we were given sovereignty from the Mother Grand Council.

I began drafting invitation letters and preparing the other requisite formalities for the meeting that would be held on the morning of February 17, 2000 in Washington DC. During the course of planning for the initial meetings, and the fact that the initial invitations would be strictly limited numerically due to the requirements of the ceremonies, logistics and the other

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<sup>4</sup> I have had and still have a great reluctance to moving quickly with the introduction of new orders, beyond a select group of people who have the necessary experience to understand the ritual, customs and, perhaps, most importantly, the culture of the respective order

<sup>5</sup> an invaluable history of the introduction of these orders is found in "The Innovators", *Collectanea* Vol. 9 Part 2 (1970), published by the Grand College of Rites

considerations, we decided to locate the meetings away from the Masonic Week hotel. The site selected was the Metropolitan Club of DC, the oldest club in the capital and a venue which would provide us with the requisite privacy and space to hold a buffet breakfast, ceremonial meetings and Chapel consecrations. 37 new members were initiated into the Order at this meeting, 15 joining Pilgrim Chapel and 22 joining Trinity Chapel.

Grand Master Barry Clarke appointed Keith Ansell as the Consecrated Commissioning Officer from the Grand Master's Council to undertake the consecrations of Pilgrim #11 (NMJ) and Trinity #12 (SJ), together with the team which included David Price, Donald Newton and Leslie Bale . In accordance with the customs of the Order, the Primus Master of each Chapel must be a Past Master. Therefore, John Bray (*Sir John of Leeds*) , an experienced brother from Yorkshire who would later serve as both a Grand Preceptor and Grand Secretary, was selected to be the Primus Master of both Chapels. Fred Allen served as the Primus Prior of Trinity Chapel and Matthew Dupee served as the Primus Prior of Pilgrim.

One of the novel elements of the Commemorative Order of St. Thomas of Acon is the tradition that members progress to the Chair, if they are willing and capable, in the order in which they were at middle to their respective Chapels. Given the national basis for the Order at its inception, it was almost unique among Masonic national organizations to see senior level national Masons serve in subordinate capacities to those who entered before them. A conspicuous illustration of this is the fact that Sir Reese of Bexar did not preside in Trinity Chapel until 2004, allowing three other brethren to preside before he occupied the oriental chair.

From this auspicious but small beginning, the Order took hold and grew rapidly. While the third Chapel, Tahoma (Washington State), was not formed until 2004, the consecrations of Lone Star Chapel and Tejas Chapel on September 11, 2005 led to the formation of a Province for the United States of America , with the following Primus Provincial Grand Officers:

Rt. Wor. Grand Preceptor	Sir Andre of Byron	Andre E. Lovas
Rt. Em. Provincial Grand Prior	Sir Reese of Bexar	Reese L. Harrison, Jr.
Provincial Grand Marshal	Sir Matthew of Philadelphia	Matthew D. Dupee
Provincial Grand Treasurer	Sir Fred of Mt Pleasant	Fred E. Allen
Provincial Grand Registrar	Sir John of Groveport	John A. Busic

Provincial Grand Secretary	Sir William of Seattle	William R. Miller
Provincial Deputy Grand Marshal	Sir Bryan of Lewisburg	Bryan L. Berry
Provincial Grand Almoner	Sir Robert of Columbus	Robert R. Neff
Provincial Grand Sword Bearer	Sir Thomas of Houston	Thomas B. Johnson, Jr.
Provincial Deputy Grand Secretary	Sir Loyd of Sulphur Springs	Loyd L. Chance
Provincial Grand Banner Bearer	Sir Thomas of Mifflinburg	Thomas Reimensnyder
Provincial Assistant Grand Marshal	Sir Thayer of Buckner Stanton	Thayer Brown
Provincial Asst. Grand Secretary	Sir James of Midlothian	James Roy Elliott
Provincial Grand Herald	Sir Edward of Belle Vernon	Edward H. Fowler, Jr.
Provincial Grand Organist	Sir William of Hopkinsville	William G. Hinton
Provincial Grand Doorkeeper	Sir Harry of Bremerton	Harry O. Houston
Provincial Grand Cellarer	Sir Ted of Piedmont	Ted H. Hendon
Provincial Grand Cellarer	Sir Donald of Mildred	Donald J. Panichi
Provincial Grand Cellarer	Sir Joseph of Toftingall	Joseph W. MacIntyre
Provincial Grand Cellarer	Sir Bernard of Houston	Kenneth B. Fischer
Provincial Grand Sentry	Sir Ronald of Ruston	Ronald E. Sharp

During its existence within the mother Grand Masters Council, our Province was led by two Grand Preceptors, Sir Andre of Byron (2005-10) and Sir Reese of Bexar (2010-2015).

By 2015, the province of the United States grew to 25 chapels in 12 states, with the total membership of more than 730 Sir Knights. Given the increasing geographic expanse of the Province, the increasing demands this growth placed on the administrative officers both here and in England, and the desire to keep the United States as a single jurisdiction, the Grand Master's Council decided to enter into a Concordat and form an independent Grand Master's Council of the United States, thus giving sovereignty over the Order within our borders to its American members.

In recognition of the high regard with which the American leadership was held by our Mother Grand Council, it was decided that Sir Andre of Byron, KH and Sir Reese of Bexar, KH would be our Primus Grand Master and Grand Prior respectively, with founding member Sir Matthew of Philadelphia, KH as Grand Marshal. Sir William of Seattle, KH and Sir Joseph of Gloucestershire, KH also served as Grand Masters of the Grand Master's Council (USA) in recognition of both their preeminent status as national Masonic leaders and their long-standing service to the Order.

In conclusion, it is difficult to understate how a random conversation in a small meeting in Canada that occurred with two English Masons, whom we had never met before, could have blossomed, not only into the development of our Grand Master's Council with more than 30 chapels and 960 members, but also into a watershed event in the transatlantic development of Anglo American masonry. The Order of St. Thomas of Acon enabled English and American Masons, for the first time, to interact and work together within the same organization, not as representatives of their respective grand jurisdictions. The process was not always frictionless, but was enriching for both sides: the Americans learning the formality of English practice and greater emphasis on ceremony (as opposed to ritual) and the British becoming exposed to the challenges of running a nationwide order with extensive geographic borders and customs which vary from region to region and, at times, jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Within ten years of its introduction into the United States, the friendships and shared experiences brought about a fraternal bonding between brethren of both transatlantic jurisdictions that resulted in more frequent international visiting, the development and propagation of the Order into new territories and jurisdictions, and the introduction into the United States of the Ancient Masonic Order of the Scarlet Cord, the Worshipful Society of Operatives, the August Order of Light, the Hermetic Chapter of Spiritual Knights, the Order of Pilgrim Preceptors and the Masonic Order of Athelstan.

When I depart the office of Grand Master, I will be the last of the thirteen original US members who joined the Order in October 1999 to preside in a leading role. The future of our Order—as it should be— will be left to a new generation of Knights who have been inspired by Humility and Charity, the precepts of our Order, as handed down by our ancient and modern predecessors who, while putting on their knightly habiliments and arms, did not fail in their Christian duty “to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and serve the distressed.”