

Writing a Lodge History

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As milestone anniversaries approach, it is proper to consider preparing or updating a history of a Lodge or Grand Lodge. This can become part of the shared celebration of achieving a significant number of years of spreading Masonic light.

A Lodge History can also be a tool to inform a new Brother of the Lodge of the traditions he will now enjoy.

A Lodge History may be useful to explain the presence of Freemasonry to the wider community. Research shows that men interested in Masonry are attracted by several aspects that can be included in a Lodge History. Those aspects attractive to potential applicants are: the rich and varied history of the Craft, biographies of famous Masons in history, Masonic architecture (even in small communities), historical myths, and even religious history connected to the Craft⁴.

This short article offers encouragement to all those considering, or engaged, in writing a Lodge History.

Assistance and Guidance:

A Lodge History is often written by a committee, with contributions from several Brethren. It can be useful to identify one Brother as the editor. It may also be useful to reach out to others for assistance and guidance. Some resources for guidance are:

1. The Grand Lodge Office. The staff may assist in confirming lists of officers, and Grand Lodge Officers.
2. The Grand Historian. The Grand Historian may have access to collections of information, or interpretations of data, that can greatly accelerate your research.
3. Members of the Masonic Library and Museum Association. A list of members is posted on our website.

Sources of Information

- Minute book, Tyler's Register
- Items in your Lodge room
- Annual Proceedings of Grand Lodge
- Public Libraries, Museum, Archives
- Long-serving Brethren of the Lodge
- Any prior history prepared by your Lodge.

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⁴ Kenny, J. Scott. "Brought to Light, Contemporary Freemasonry, Meaning and Society" (2016) Wilfred Laurier University Press, Waterloo ON Canada

- Your Grand Lodge library, museum, archives, and office

The most obvious sources of information to assist you in your research are within your own Lodge. The minute books held by the Secretary are essential when preparing a Lodge History. Bro. Chris Hoddapp has a comment in his History of the Grand Lodge of Indiana, “Heritage Endures”⁵, that bears repeating. *“It has been a longstanding Indiana Masonic law that lodge minutes in particular are the property of the Grand Lodge, but that is a meaningless concept if a physical record simply ceases to exist. At least in another two centuries, if an entirely new variety of artificial light is created, a historian will be able to decipher printed letters on paper. Future Freemasons will have to rely on the common sense of secretaries to preserve paper records of their activities for those who may follow, whether it’s required by the rules or not. Otherwise, the history of our present may quickly become lost in the digital past of the not too distant future.”*

The Tyler’s Register is most useful as a tool to identify special guests and significant events of the past.

Many artifacts in Lodge rooms have small plaques giving the name of the person who made or donated an item. These are quite useful starting points for short anecdotes or stories about the item, and the donor. Bro. Chris Hoddapp notes: *“Freemasons by their very nature treasure myth.”* So it is important to try to validate information when possible, and share the provenance of significant items, to avoid perpetuating myths and legends.

The annual Proceedings of your Grand Lodge are also a useful resource. Most Lodges have a collection of printed copies of the Proceedings. In Ontario Canada, a collaboration between the Sankey Collection at the Brock University Library, the Grand Lodge Library, and The Heritage Lodge No. 730, means that digital copies of the Proceedings are now accessible via the Brock University Library⁶. In the United States, The George Washington Masonic National Memorial is digitizing the proceedings of participating grand lodges to make them available online. To date (May 2021) the complete inventories by year of nine US Grand Lodges are available⁷.

The annual Proceedings of Grand Lodge may provide information about special events held by the Lodge. There may be information on honours bestowed on a Brother of the Lodge.

Your Grand Lodge library, museum, archives, or office may have a wealth of information. As an example, the Museum of Freemasonry (London, England) explains on their website that their holdings include:

- Petitions to form new lodges or chapters (for information on the founders)
- Letter books (copies of letters sent by Grand Lodge)
- Minute Books or notes from meetings of the Grand Lodge or Provincial/District Grand Lodge

⁵ Hoddapp, Christopher. “Heritage Endures” (2018) Grand Lodge of Indiana, Indianapolis

⁶ Brock University Library Special Collections: <https://brocku.ca/library/archives/#1542396805804-9a5e258e-a5b8> Accessed May 2021

⁷ George Washington National Masonic Memorial; The Masonic Digital Archives: <http://173.254.20.132/archives/> Accessed May 2021

- Correspondence between provinces or districts
- Annual returns (sent to Grand Lodge/Chapter to compile membership records; these sometimes include additional details about members)
- Provincial and District Year Books

Masonic libraries, and some public libraries, may have examples of Masonic magazines or periodicals. For example, the Museum of Freemasonry explains: “*During the 19th and early 20th centuries, many lodges published magazines, which often contain details of meetings, photographs of members, biographical information and obituaries. Masonic Periodicals Online is an electronic record of English masonic periodicals published between 1790 and 1906. You can access Masonic Periodicals Online via our research resources page.*”⁸ Other libraries may offer something similar.

Public libraries, local community archives and museums, have surprising amounts of information about Masonic Lodges. This could be information on public cornerstone-laying events. Perhaps there are photos of presentations after fundraising efforts. Maybe there are newspaper clippings of announcements of Masonic meetings, or Masons attending a memorial service. And librarians, archivists, or curators, are excellent resources to provide guidance in your effort as well.

Local and community archives normally have a wealth of information about notable persons. It is no coincidence that many notable persons also held Masonic membership. Research shows that Freemasonry has an image of being associated with the successful, the prominent, and the wealthy. This image attracts the attention of some applicants.

As you prepare a Lodge History it is time to contact the longest-serving Brethren of your Lodge. Ask them to share their reminiscences. Ask questions about specific persons or events to gather useful anecdotes that can change a dull story (*Bro. Smythe was Master of the Lodge for two terms*) into something notable (*Bro. Smythe served as Master for two terms because when Bro. Doe was SW he was called to active military duty as Colonel of the Regiment*). Ask if there is something the Lodge has been noted for.

A Lodge History isn't a high-school essay that requires an extensive bibliography and footnotes or citations according to a formal style-guide! Remember that it is really beneficial and useful to others in the future if your sources of information are clearly recorded. Professional historians and Masonic scholars have commented that Lodge Histories are often the only source of archival information available.

Size and Scope of the Lodge History

- Short anecdotes of Brethren and significant events.
- Comprehensive history.

⁸ Museum of Freemasonry, Freemason's Hall, 60 Great Queen Street, London England; “Research Guide: Researching a Lodge or Chapter History” <https://museumfreemasonry.org.uk/researching-lodge-or-chapter-history> Accessed May 2021

The authors of this article have looked at many Lodge histories. It is clear that there are two expectations for the size and scope of the final document.

First, when a Lodge History is being used as part of a program for a celebratory dinner or reception, the Lodge History is expected to be no longer than a few pages. And the stories will describe the notable Brethren of the Lodge, and some contributions of the Lodge to the community.

Second, when a Lodge History is to be a more expansive work, and a reference for future generations, then size is determined more by the time available than the space to be filled. When this is the case then there are typically three customary aspects of content to be included in a Lodge history.

Recall the words: “...*by what authority we act...*”. This means there must **first** be clear identification of the Lodge. The cover, or title page, should show the full and proper name of the Lodge. This is particularly important for Lodges that have changed their names.

The date and place of Institution of the Lodge should be given (as per the Warrant or Charter). Any moves from one location to another, whether community to community, or building to building, should be listed.

Take heed of the words: “... *warrants...have passed through the hands of many talented and highly esteemed brethren...*”. The **second** custom of a complete Lodge History is to include a list of the names of the Masters, and the year or years they were in office. It is also notable that some Lodge Histories include the names of Wardens, and the Secretary.

There are some Brethren who, through merit and ability, serve the craft and the Grand Lodge. They earn or are honoured with rank as a Grand Lodge Officer. The **third** quite appropriate aspect is to include a list of these Brethren in a Lodge History.

Of especial note is the expectation that Grand Masters who are or were members of the Lodge be properly recognized. This is easy for those Grand Masters in your own jurisdiction. The same respect should be offered to those who were members of your Lodge and who went on to high esteem elsewhere.

It may also be quite instructive to include a list of esteemed Brethren of the Lodge who have excelled in concordant and appendant bodies.

Finally, as an option, a comprehensive Lodge History could include a chronological list of all Brethren of the Lodge.

Style of the Lodge History

- A list of meetings with highlights
- Selected themes, with stories covering special topics
- An authoritative compilation of information

Under the guidance of those with experience, and with proper consideration of the sources of information, as well as the basic content expected for the Lodge History, it is time to think about the style of the finished work.

It is important to remember that few people will read your Lodge History from front cover to back page. Choose a style that allows readers to pick and choose at will.

More than one Lodge history is a simple book of several dozen pages providing a list of meeting dates, and highlights from each meeting. This includes the degree work completed, an indication of the Masonic Education presented, special visitors including Grand Lodge Officers, and notes of presentations made.

The key sources of information for a Lodge History such as this are the Lodge Minutes, Tyler's Register, and the annual Proceedings of Grand Lodge.

Some Lodges publish a Lodge History where the overall organization of the work is to consider events and anecdotes over a certain time such as decade-be-decade. There are stories of donations to the Lodge. There are stories of degree teams from a specific shared workplace. There are stories of several generations of the same family gathering to participate in the degree work of a young Mason. There are stories of benevolence and charity.

One example of an authoritative history of a Lodge is when a long-serving Secretary collected as many Summonses and Minutes as were available. He formatted the collection so that each meeting could be reviewed by reading the Summons on one page, and then the Minutes of that meeting on the next page. He also added some Masonic Education articles and other items of interest. The finished and published book was professionally bound to be placed in a few local libraries.

Where to share the finished History?

Short Lodge Histories of just a few pages are often included with the program for a celebratory or gala dinner event. Additional copies may be produced so every Brother of the Lodge receives his own copy.

A comprehensive Lodge History will cost money to print. Since it will represent your Lodge for many years to come, choose the printing and binding process well. Internet publishing has grown to the point that special-interest books with a limited audience -- such as a Lodge History -- can be printed with a professional appearance.

You can assist our future Brethren by donating both the printed, and digital, copies of your Lodge History to:

- Your own Lodge archives.
- Your Grand Lodge Library, Museum, and Archives
- A local public library, public archives, or public museum
- Nearby members of the Masonic Library and Museum Association

You should also consider making your Lodge History available on the internet. For example, you can visit the website of The Grand Lodge of Nova Scotia (<https://grandlodgens.org/>) and find digital editions of two books covering the history of the Grand Lodge. They are free to all to download.

Conclusion

Writing a Lodge History is not a challenging task because there are many sources of information. Determination is required to complete the task because of the time needed to review and select the information to be recorded. Inspiration is necessary to choose carefully those stories and anecdotes and details that will finally be published.

Recall the charge to the Historian of the Lodge at his investiture: *“Your diligence and discrimination in faithfully recording and reporting the events of the lodge are especially necessary in order that the brethren of the future may know and appreciate the past.”*