

FREEMASONRY AND EDUCATION

Traditionally, throughout its long history, Freemasonry has taken a leading role in the promotion of learning and education. From its early beginnings, in the 18th century in England and Scotland, Masons were among the founders of learned academies. Masons have been active in education at every level from grammar school through university.

The Charge of the Fellowcraft Degree reminds the candidate that the impressive ceremonies of the degree are calculated to inculcate in his mind the importance of studying the liberal arts and sciences. He is particularly reminded to study the noble science of Geometry, which forms the basis of Freemasonry. Not only does Geometry explain the properties of nature, it demonstrates the more important truths of morality.

If Freemasonry is “about” anything, it is about the education of the individual to become a knowledgeable, informed, and moral human being within society. Education is valued above ignorance. Seeking further Light in Masonry means more than learning more about the Craft. It also means that Freemasons and non-Masons alike must discipline themselves to seek knowledge through whatever means available—by studying at colleges and universities or by self-directed reading and study.

Because Freemasonry places such great importance on education, we have become steadfast supporters of the Public Schools. Horace Mann, the father of our present system of public schools, wrote that the object of a free

public schools system is “to give every child a free, straight, solid pathway by which he can walk directly up from the ignorance of an infant to a knowledge of the primary duties of a man.” The same can, of course, be said about the progress of a candidate through the three Masonic Degrees, from Apprentice, to Fellowcraft, to Master Mason.

Freemasonry and the public schools share several important values. Basic to each is the concept of the dignity of the individual. Every man, in every condition, is great. The grandeur of each man’s unique nature makes insignificant all external distinctions. It is the internal and not the external qualifications that make a man who he is, and entitles him to be treated with respect and dignity.

Respect for the dignity of the individual is essential in a free society. Human rights rest on human dignity. Man’s minimum needs must be met if he is to live at all, but men and women cannot live a human life “unless they have the chance” to satisfy the needs of their rational and spiritual nature. Democracy is the only form of government founded on the dignity of man. Equality and justice, so important to Freemasons, are the two distinguishing characteristics of democracy. Democracy enables us to enjoy the freedom to live human lives. We must be free in order to exercise those talents wherewith God has blessed us, as well to His glory as to the welfare of our fellow creatures.

Freedom, security and well-being can only be attained in society through an educated population. James Madison wrote that “Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power that knowledge gives.” And Thomas Jefferson said: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”

Our Founding Fathers, Freemason and non-Mason alike, understood that eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. And vigilance requires an educated population equipped with the skills to learn about and discuss the great issues. The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was one of the greatest accomplishments of the infant United States. Under its regulations, Congress set aside a section in each township in the old Northwest Territory (Ohio, Indiana, etc) for the support of public schools. This was the first time in history that a government had the foresight to plan for the education of its people. Since that time, the individual States and now the Federal Government have supported and developed our system of free public education.

The California State public school system was started in the 1850's, and the first State Superintendent of Public Instruction was John Swett, a transplanted Mason who had come west in the years following the Gold Rush.

The public schools have always been a special concern of California Masons. Charles Albert Adams, Grand Master in 1920, wrote that as Masons

“we subscribe to the belief that an enlightened citizenship is the first great care of a progressive State.” He believed that the future of our free democracy depended on the quality of our public schools. His Proclamation of the first Public Schools Week in 1920 sounds eerily familiar when we consider the conditions of our public schools in 2005. Here is what he had to say:

“A crisis is now confronting the Public School System in America. There is a dearth of competent teachers; schools are being closed; children, particularly in the rural communities, are being denied the education to which they are entitled and there is apparently a deplorable apathy concerning remedial measures which have been proposed.”

While the details may be different than they were 84 years ago, but the problems in our public schools still remain. A crisis is confronting our public schools once again. And it is our Masonic responsibility to do something about improving the conditions in our schools so that our children can receive a quality and useful education.

Under the California Masonic Code, matters concerning the public schools are the sole exception to our Lodges becoming involved in political issues in our communities. The Lodge is a proper forum for discussing problems in the schools in our local communities. It is proper for a Lodge or a group of Masons to act publicly in support of school bond issues and similar matters before the electorate. And individual Masons are encouraged to

assist their local schools to make policy, by volunteering to serve on advisory committees or even seeking election as a member of the school board. These are only a few of the ways Freemasons can influence public policy pertaining to our free public schools.

Freemasonry and education remain closely related in the world at large as well. The modern world is confronted with poverty and its effects; religious and political fundamentalism; and overpopulation. The fight against bigotry and fanaticism must be fought in the minds of men. Education is the key to the solution of the world's problems in these present circumstances. An educated man learns to appreciate the wide range of opinions on any subject. Freemasonry, in addition, allows men of many different professions and backgrounds to meet together in a spirit of cooperation and understanding.

All of Freemasonry's principles and ideals are worthless, unless they are inculcated in the minds of each Mason by education within our Lodges. Our fundamental principles are called "landmarks" because they are signposts. They are not constraints. Freemasonry is not restricted to what goes on in the Lodge room. It has to become a way of life in order for the new Mason to become a true and full-fledged Mason. The threefold orientation of Masonic work for the candidate is toward himself, toward his Brethren, and toward the world at large.

A Mason cannot do Masonic work in isolation. He needs to be within the Lodge's framework. This interaction with his fellow Masons will lead the suitably prepared and educated Mason to the practice of tolerance himself, and spreading the message of tolerance everywhere.