

HOW FREEMASONRY CAME TO CALIFORNIA AND HAWAII

Freemasonry came to California and Hawaii by land and sea. Adventurers who challenged the wilderness and mastered it carried freemasonry overland. They trapped the beaver, lived on bear and buffalo, fought Indians and caroused away their hard-earned wages. They were known as the Mountain Men.

When the American frontier moved swiftly from the Mississippi to the Pacific, these men were the leaders, guides, scouts, soldiers and statesmen. They displayed pragmatic wisdom about morality and politics. Their morality did not concentrate on abstract ideas or achieving an ideal virtue. They concentrated on human deeds and their consequences for good and evil.

Most of the mountain men came from Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Pennsylvania and Ohio. They had a long tradition of Indian fighting and pioneering behind them. But in the Rocky Mountains everything in nature was bigger and wilder than anything their fathers had experienced. The mountain men who survived the constant danger and hardship were toughened to an extraordinary degree of courage, skill and physical fitness.

Among the earliest men to bring moral restraint, respect for law and justice and for the rights of each individual human being, was Christopher "Kit" Carson. He had learned these attitudes toward other men at the altar of Freemasonry. Carson arrived in California in 1829. He was made a Mason in Montezuma Lodge No. 109, New Mexico, under the jurisdiction of

the Grand Lodge of Missouri. Carson carried the first overland mail from Taos, New Mexico to military headquarters at Monterey, California. He was with General John C. Fremont at the capture of Sonoma, California, in 1846—ending the Bear Flag Revolt.

So far as can be determined the first Master Mason to establish permanent residence in California was Abel Stearns, from Salem, Massachusetts. He settled and prospered in the “pueblo” of Los Angeles. In 1842 he had the distinction of shipping the first gold mined in California to the Philadelphia Mint. Stearns obtained the gold as payment for goods that he sold to the miners in Los Angeles County. It is interesting to note that this discovery of gold in 1840 in amounts large enough to send back East, caused not a bit of interest except in the local area. Yet, a few years later the discovery of a few flakes of gold at Sutter’s Mill caused the mad California Gold Rush.

The first American settler in the Napa Valley, famous today for its grapes and wines, was George Yount. Yount received the degrees of Masonry in Benicia Lodge No. 5 and from 1856 to 1864 served as Grand Bible Bearer of the Grand Lodge of California.

The Reverend Saschel Woods, a Cumberland Presbyterian minister and a member of Wakanda Lodge No. 52 of Carrollton, Missouri, brought the first Masonic charter carried to California. The Charter was for Western Star Lodge No. 98 of the Grand Lodge of Missouri, and was dated May 10,

1848. The Lodge was to be opened at Benton City, California. Woods traveled to California with Peter Lassen, who was named Junior Warden in the Charter. In 1848 Peter Lassen was the leader of an immigrant train of twelve wagons, whose owners planned to settle on Deer Creek in California. The route they followed was remote and impractical, and the party endured many trials until they were finally rescued.

Between this first charter and 1850 some fifteen other charters and dispensations found their way to California. The following were used to form Masonic Lodges:

1. California Lodge No. 13 (now No. 1), San Francisco. Chartered by the Grand Lodge of the District of Columbia, November 9, 1848.
2. Pacific Lodge (now Sublime-Benicia Lodge No. 5), Benicia, dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana Ancient York Masons, June 5, 1849.
3. Davy Crockett Lodge (later Davy Crockett No. 7 and San Francisco No. 7), San Francisco, dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Louisiana Ancient York Masons, 1849. Charter revoked in the 1850s.
4. Connecticut Lodge No. 75 (now Tehama No. 3), Sacramento, chartered by the Grand Lodge of Connecticut, January 31, 1849.
5. New Jersey Lodge (later Jennings Lodge No. 4), Sacramento, dispensation from the Grand Lodge of New Jersey, March 1, 1849.
6. Sierra Nevada Lodge (now Madison No. 23 of Grass Valley), Centerville, dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Indiana, May 1848.

7. Lavelly Lodge (later Marysville No. 9 and Corinthian No. 9, now Corinthian-Hammonton No. 9), dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Illinois, October 1849.
8. Pacific Lodge, Long's Bar, dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Illinois, October 1848.
9. Lafayette Lodge No. 29 (later Nevada Lodge No. 13), Nevada City, chartered by the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin, April 20, 1850.
10. Gregory Yale Lodge, Stockton, dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Florida, 1849.

Many of the outstanding leaders of early California came from Masonic ranks. Benjamin Wilson arrived in 1841 and became the second Mayor of Los Angeles and a member of Los Angeles Lodge No. 42. Dr. Robert Semple came to California in 1844 and affiliated with Benicia Lodge No. 5. He served as the President of the first California State Constitutional Convention held in Monterey in 1849. Nine of the 48 delegates to that Convention were Master Masons. Their influence far outweighed their numbers. They brought California into the Union as a free state, and they adopted a strong public education platform.

The first Masons to reach California were seafaring men who traded along the coast from San Diego in the south to the Russian settlements in the north. They were a hardy lot and feared neither man nor the elements. Their trading and whaling took them as far as the Hawaiian Islands.

Captain M. LeTellier organized the first Masonic Lodge formed west of the Missouri River on board the whaling ship Ajax in Honolulu harbor, on

April 8, 1842. He held a commission from the Supreme Council 33^o of France “to set up Lodges in the Pacific Ocean and elsewhere in his voyages; to issue warrants, to call upon the Supreme Council for charters; to make Masons at sight....” The Lodge ritual was in French, and the degrees were the first three degrees in the Scottish Rite. The Lodge was named Le Progres de l’Oceanie No. 124—it is now under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Hawaii.

Among the charter members of this Lodge were John Meek and Henry Sea. Captain Meek had settled in the Hawaiian Islands in 1809 only 31 years after the English Freemason Captain James Cook discovered them. Meek was born in Marblehead, Massachusetts. He was the Captain of a ship engaged in otter hunting along the California coast as early as 1812. He may have been the first Master Mason to visit California.

The first Mason to settle in California was a seafaring man named Robert Jonathan Elwell. Captain Elwell was raised in Lodge St Andrew in Boston in 1823. In 1829 he married the daughter of the owner of a Spanish rancho and settled in Santa Barbara.

And so Freemasonry came to California and Hawaii by sea and by land. Men whose lives were influenced by its teachings carried Freemasonry into the American frontier. They in turn were influential in the development of the California and Hawaii we enjoy today.

The Masons who contributed to the founding of California were men of active and men of the world. They did not keep their Masonry only in their

Lodges—they practiced out of the Lodge the great ideas taught in it. When writing the first California Constitution men such as Robert Semple applied the Masonic principles of respect for law and justice and the rights of individuals by insisting that California be admitted to the Union 1850 as a free state—not allowing slavery to be part of the new State. Education was important to these Masons, and so they created a good system of public education in California. John Swett, the first Superintendent of Public Instruction in California, was an active Freemason.

Men today are pioneers still. The complexities of modern life require the same pragmatic wisdom practiced by the mountain men and early sea captains. In raising our families, going about our jobs, participating in civic affairs, we need all the courage and skill that our forefathers had. Freemasonry equips us with the attitudes of moral restraint, consideration for the less fortunate, and understanding of human nature that will give us strength—like our great-grandfathers—enabling us to leave our communities and state better than we found them. Applied Freemasonry is the key.

NOTE: This paper is largely based on a paper by MW Eugene S. Hopp, Past Grand Master of Masons in California and Hawaii, February 14, 1975, published in the April 1975 issue of *The Philalethes Magazine*