



WISCONSIN MASONIC HANDBOOK

CHAPTER 16

HISTORY OF THE GRAND LODGE OF WISCONSIN

A. HOW ESTABLISHED

1. Menomanie Lodge No. 374

Freemasonry in Wisconsin first took organized form on the night of December 27, 1823, when seven army officers and three civilians met at the home of Brother George Johnston on the west bank of the Fox River in what is now Green Bay. The soldiers were attached to the 3rd Regiment and stationed at Fort Howard under the command of Col. John McNeil, also a Freemason. Desiring to form a lodge, the men sent a petition to the Grand Lodge of New York for a charter.

Wisconsin was then a part of the territory of Michigan and very lightly settled. Native Americans still roamed freely and played havoc with traders on the Fox. The soldiers were there to maintain order and to protect the settlers in the vast wilderness.

Dispensation for the formation of a lodge was granted, and on September 2, 1824, the interested brethren met again to organize it. Their charter from the Grand Lodge of New York was dated December 3rd. During the following year, Menomanie Lodge #374 ceased to be a military lodge and became a public one, acquiring Henry S. Baird as its Senior Deacon in December of 1825 as membership grew from ten to twenty-one.

Brother Baird was elected Worshipful Master two years later, unaware then that he would become Grand Master of Masons in Wisconsin a score of years later in 1856 and 1857. An 1854 address given by him in Green Bay outlined the lodge's records, including names and dates to 1827 and its cessation as a lodge in 1830. It was, therefore, never chartered as a "Wisconsin" lodge; moreover, its New York charter was destroyed in a fire during 1870 at Washington Lodge #21, Green Bay. Thus, Baird is largely responsible for preserving any records that remain.

Having been operational in the Territory (which at the time included all of the present states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, and those portions of North and South Dakota east of the Missouri River), Menomanie stands as the

first "chartered" lodge in spite of its early demise. The original dispensation from New York's Menomanie Lodge #374 is housed in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin.

2. (Melody) Lodge No.1 at Mineral Point

The rich lead mines in the southwestern part of the Wisconsin territory carved out of the original Michigan Territory in 1836 attracted a large influx of settlers including influential men from Missouri and Illinois. These men too, looked forward to organizing lodges of Freemasonry.

Between 1840 and early 1843 there was, however, but one. Melody Lodge No. 49 under the Grand Lodge of Missouri received a dispensation at Mineral Point on October 8, 1840. Organized on July 27, 1841, it was granted a charter in October 1842 under which it began work February 15, 1843. William R. Smith, Adjutant General of the Wisconsin Territory, was its Master (later to become Grand Master in Wisconsin in 1849 and 1850). The lodge's Wardens were Charles Dunn, Chief Justice of the Territorial Supreme Court, and Moses Meeker, an early settler at Galena (now Illinois) who built the first smelter in the region.

3. Melody Lodge No.2 at Platteville

Meanwhile on January 10, 1843, a second dispensation came from Missouri to form their Lodge No. 65 in Wisconsin about 20 miles from Mineral Point in Platteville. It, too, was named for George Henry Curzon Melody, who as Grand Lecturer of Missouri, doubtless had much to do with the launching of Wisconsin's lodges, as his previously formed namesake now took the name Mineral Point Lodge; there is also Melody lodge and Chapter in Missouri named for this man, who once took a band of native Americans abroad to show in London and Paris.

Platteville's Melody Lodge contained thirty-five charter members including Benjamin T. Kavanaugh, Superintendent of Missions to the Sioux and Chippewa Indians, later elected Wisconsin's first Grand Master. The lodge was organized February 15, 1843, and it was granted its charger October 31, 1843.

4. (Milwaukee) Kilbourn Lodge No.3

The Grand Lodge of Illinois as that area's Grand jurisdiction chartered Milwaukee Lodge No. 22. Dispensation was granted on June 12, 1843; the first meeting was held July 5th. Brother Lemuel B. Hull, an Episcopal clergyman, was elected the first Worshipful Master, but he died in October of that year; his funeral was said to have been the first Masonic one in Milwaukee. Abram D. Smith, who had been elected Senior Warden under Hull, assumed the duties of

Master in an election under the charter held November 1st. Brother Smith further went on to become Wisconsin's Grand Master in 1846, 1847, 1848, and 1851.

One of the thirty-nine charter members of Milwaukee Lodge was Byron Kilbourn, whose name the lodge now bears in recognition of the exceptional service he rendered and his generosity toward the lodge.

5. Grand Lodge of Wisconsin Formed

Worshipful Master of Melody Lodge at Platteville, Benjamin T. Kavanaugh, prepared a resolution looking to the formation of a committee to confer with Mineral Point and Milwaukee (now Kilbourn) Lodges, with a view to forming the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin.

A Masonic Convention was held in the village of Madison in the Territorial State House beginning December 18, 1843. This convention was composed of seven members. They were George H. Walker, proxy for the Master, and two Wardens Dwight F. Lawton and David Merrill from the Milwaukee Lodge; Moses Meeker, Junior Warden from Mineral Point; George W. Lakin, proxy for the Master, John H. Roundtree proxy for the Senior Warden of Melody Lodge, and Ben C. Eastman, proxy for the Junior Warden of Platteville's Lodge. A lodge opened in "due and ancient form" in the third degree in keeping with the mother jurisdictions' A. F. & A. M. status.

With Moses Meeker as Chairman and George Lakin as Secretary, a committee was appointed to report on the expediency of forming a Grand Lodge of Wisconsin. The report, coming in the form of a resolution, was adopted, and a committee was appointed to draft a constitution to be ready by six PM the same evening of the convention's call to order. When the convention reconvened at 6:00 p.m., the original seven members had been augmented by the presence of six more brethren: Mason C. Darling, Lemuel White, Robert Masters, David Newland, John Trowbridge, and Lyman Crossman.

When a slate of officers was nominated, elected and installed, Benjamin T. Kavanaugh became Grand Master; he, along with Deputy Master Abram D. Smith, and Grand Treasurer Thomas P. Burnett, not being present, were installed by proxy. Grand Lecturer Dwight F. Lawton installed all Senior Grand Warden Moses Meeker and Junior Grand Warden David Merrill, as well as Grand Secretary Ben C. Eastman. Eight additional offices received appointees by announcement, and a set of By-Laws was adopted from some now unknown jurisdiction, requiring a hasty appointment of a committee to make revisions suitable to the Wisconsin experience.

After fixing the date for the new communication of the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin to be held in Madison on the second Wednesday of January in 1844, the convention closed in "due and ancient" form of a convened lodge. Several Grand Lodges of the United States were notified of the new Grand Lodge's formation and asked to grant formal recognition of same.

B. GROWTH

1. Earliest Lodges in the State

Having accomplished the formation of a Grand Lodge in Wisconsin with representatives from Mineral Point # 1, Melody #2 of Platteville and Kilbourn #3 of Milwaukee, charters could now be granted to these three as of January 17, 1844 by the Wisconsin Grand Lodge. The state was now set for constituent lodges to form throughout the state.

Three more Wisconsin lodges were chartered on January 10, 1845, just one year after the Grand Lodge's birth. They were Warren Lodge No.4 of Potosi, Madison Lodge No.5, and Olive Branch Lodge No. 6 at New Diggins.

2. Further Chartering

A total of 371 charters had been granted as Wisconsin approached its sesquicentennial year of existence for the Grand Lodge. With discontinuation of 169 of those, 202 charters remain in force.

C. SOURCES OF DETAILED HISTORY

1. Official Proceedings of the Grand Lodge

In the archives of the Grand Lodge office is a complete file of proceedings from the very beginning to the present. One copy of most of these proceedings has found itself in the safe repository of the Wisconsin State Historical Society's Library at Madison. These include, in detail, a record of what took place together with the complete text of the Grand Masters' addresses and voluminous correspondence reports.

In 1878 the Grand Lodge ordered the reprint of all proceedings prior to 1853 in order to insure their preservation. It is this history, now found in the office of the Grand Secretary, which includes the short-lived lodge formed in Green Bay.

2. Freemasonry in Wisconsin

An oversized volume edited with a historical review by Julius Bleyer was titled, "Freemasonry in Wisconsin." The Evening Wisconsin Printing Company of Milwaukee published it in 1900. The book also contains biographical sketches of men who have been prominent in the various Masonic bodies in the state.

It further contains a chapter titled: "Masonic Reminiscences" by William Chester Swain, who was Wisconsin's Grand Master in 1893. Swain was born in Vermont in 1832 and raised to the sublime degree of Master Mason at St. Nicholas Lodge #321, New York, in 1863. After farming in Wisconsin's Sauk County three years, he became foreman of the composing room of Milwaukee's DAILY NEWS. Then he formed a job printing business with Samuel C. Tate, which was incorporated as Swain & Tate in 1892. He died September 15, 1909, leaving his summary of Nineteenth Century Masonry in the state within the binding of this rare book.

3. Brochure by Past Grand Master Charles F. Lamb

A valuable contribution to the literature relating to the founding of our Grand Lodge is a brochure written by P.G.M. Charles F. Lamb. The Committee on Masonic Research published it in 1927.

4. The First One Hundred Years

On the occasion of the centennial of the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin, Past Grand Master Robert O. Jasperson wrote a history titled, "The First One Hundred Years". It was published in 1944 with the approval of Grand Master Louis D. Potter under the direction of the Committee on Centennial Celebration, chaired by Deputy Grand Master Hubert L. Mount.

Brother Jasperson described his purpose: "to attempt to extract from the Proceedings history making incidents, glimpses of the men who made that history." It includes some editorialized opinion in addition to much fact. There are excerpts from the addresses of some of the Grand Masters that are timeless in their relevance.

A copy of this book was furnished to every Wisconsin lodge in 1944, and copies are also in the Wisconsin Masonic Foundation Library at the Grand Lodge office building.

D. RELATIONSHIPS TO U.S. HISTORY

The first Masonic book printed in North America was a reprint of Anderson's Constitutions of 1723, originally printed in England in 1723. Brother Benjamin Franklin published these "Constitutions" when he became Grand Master of Masons in Philadelphia in 1734.

In Franklin's later life he was among fifty-five deputies who met in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation produced by the Second Continental Congress of the United States. The group debated and ultimately came up with the Constitution of the United States. A majority of the delegates are regarded to have been Freemasons. Of the thirty-nine who signed the document on September 17, 1787, thirteen were Freemasons according to the Masonic Service Association booklet, "Masonic Membership of the Signers" (copyright August 1, 1986), but others may also have been members of the Fraternity.

The U.S. Constitution, having been a direct accord with the principles of Freemasonry, became the focus of a publication by the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin celebrating the document's bicentennial year as the philosophical foundation upon which this nation's government rests.