

History of the Royal Arch Degree

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If we except the Master Degree, there is no other degree in Masonry that has been so extensively diffused, or is as important in its historical and symbolic import, as the Royal Arch, or, as it has been called, on account of its sublime significance, “the Holy Royal Arch”. It has been called “the root, heart, and marrow of Masonry” and that it is “indescribably more august, sublime, and important than any which precede it, and is, in fact, the summit and perfection of Ancient Craft Masonry.” It is found, in fact, in every Rite in some modified form, and sometimes under a different name, but always preserving those same symbolic relations to the Lost Word which constitute its essential character.

Whoever carefully studies the Master’s degree in its symbolic signification will be convinced that it is in a mutilated condition, meaning that it is imperfect and unfinished in its history, and that terminating abruptly in its symbolism, it leaves the mind still waiting for something that is necessary for its completeness. This deficiency is supplied by the Royal Arch Degree.

Hence, when the Union took place in England in 1813 between the two rival Grand Lodges, while there was a strong and hereditary disposition on the part of the English Masons to preserve the simplicity of the Old York Rite by confining Freemasonry to the three symbolic degrees, it was found necessary to define Ancient Craft Masonry as consisting of three degrees including “the Sublime Degree of the Holy Royal Arch.”

There was a time, undoubtedly, when the Royal Arch did not exist as an independent degree, but was a complementary part of the Master’s Degree, to which it gave a necessary completion. Ramsay^[1] introduced it

^[1] Ramsay, Andrew Michael - Chevalier – attempted to introduce a ‘Templar’ concept of Masonry which included the Royal Arch theory.

into the high degrees on the continent of Europe; Dermott^{2[2]} fabricated it for the use of his Grand Lodge; and Dunckerley^{3[3]} is said to have dissevered it from the third degree in the legal Grand Lodge of England. The precise method and time of its disseverance from the third establishment, as an independent degree in England and America, constitutes an important and interesting part of the history of Masonry.

It is evident that the existence of the Royal Arch as an independent and distinct degree dates at a comparatively modern period. In none of the old manuscript records of Masonry is there the slightest allusion to it, and Anderson does not make any reference to it in his history of the Order. The *true word*, which constitutes the essential character of the Royal Arch Degree, was found by Dr. Oliver in an old Master Mason's tracing board of about 1725 and hence he concludes "that the word, at that time, had not been severed from the third degree and transferred to another" – in other words, that the Royal Arch Degree had not yet been fabricated. The earliest mention of it in England was in the year 1740, just two years after the schism which separated the Ancient from the Modern Grand Lodge, - and it is attributed to the Ancient body. The truth is, though, that Ramsay had incorporated a Royal Arch Degree under a different title in his high degrees and there is no doubt that Dermott, who was really the inventor of the English system, was indebted to him for many of his ideas, as Dunkerley was when he composed the Royal Arch for the legal Grand Lodge.

As late as the year 1758, the Constitutional Grand Lodge had no Royal Arch Degree, for in that year the Grand Secretary declared that "our society is neither Arch, Royal Arch or Ancient" and in the lecture of the third degree prepared by Anderson and Desaguliers it is said, "that which is lost is now found", meaning, says Oliver, that the Master's Word was delivered to the newly raised Mason in the latter ceremonies of the third degree, which would preclude the necessity for the Royal Arch Degree.

But about the year 1766, Thomas Dunkerley, who had been authorized by the Constitutional Grand Lodge, or the "Moderns", to inaugurate a new system of lectures, commenced his modifications of the old system, which had been hitherto practiced by dissevering the Master's

^{2[2]} Dermott, Laurence – Grand Secretary of the Ancient York Masons – wrote the Ahiman Rezon – Constitutions of Freemasonry. Dismembered the Third Degree and instituted the Royal Arch degree.

^{3[3]} Dunckerley, Thomas – reconstructed the Royal Arch of Dermott and got it approved by the Grand Lodge of England.

Word from the Third Degree. This involved the necessity of a new degree; and Dunkerley, borrowing from Ramsey, from Dermott, and from his own invention, fabricated the degree of Royal Arch for the Modern Masons; a violent innovation, for the success of which he was indebted only to his own great popularity among the craft and the influence of the Grand Master. Oliver thinks that the introduction of the Royal Arch degree into the Modern system could not have been earlier than the dedication of Freemason's Hall in 1766. Ten years after the regulations of the degree were established, and at the Union of the two Grand Lodges in 1813, the Holy Royal Arch was formally and officially recognized as apart of Ancient Craft Masonry, and so it has ever since remained.

The result of these investigations in which we are relying heavily on the authority of Oliver, is that, until the year 1740, the essential element of the Royal Arch constituted a component part of the Master's degree, and was, of course, its concluding portion; that, as a degree, it was not at all recognized, being but the component of one; that about that time it was dissevered from its original connection and elevated to the position and invested with the form of a distinct degree by the body which called itself "the Grand Lodge of England according to the Old Constitutions", but which is more familiarly known as the Dermott or the Athol Grand Lodge, and frequently as the "Ancients", that in 1766, a similar degree fabricated by Dunkerley, was adopted by the Constitutional Grand Lodge, or the "Moderns", and that in 1813, it was formerly recognized as a part of the York Rite by the United Grand Lodge of England.

In America, the history of the degree followed that of the English system. As most of the American Lodges derived their warrants from the Athol Grand Lodge, the Royal Arch must have been introduced at the time of their constitution. The government of the degree was for a long time under the Master's Lodges, and many years elapsed before it was taken thence and placed under the control of distinct bodies called Grand Chapters. In America, it was not until 1798 that a Grand Chapter was formed, and many lodges persisted for some years in conferring the Royal Arch degree under the authority of their warrants from Grand Lodges. Such a situation undoubtedly occurred in the case of Independent Royal Arch lodge Number 2 here in New York.

Maintaining everywhere an identity in its symbolic signification, the Royal Arch varies in different countries in its historical details. In America, the legend is the same as the English, but varying in some of its details. The

Preliminary degrees are the Mark Master, Past Master and Most Excellent Master and the principle officers are the High Priest, King, Scribe, Captain of the Host, Principle Sojourner, Royal Arch Captain and three Masters of the Veils. Although the legend or historical basis might vary in the different rites and Grand Lodges, in all of them the symbolic significance of the Royal Arch was identical. Hence, the building of the second temple, so prominent a symbol in the American and English systems, and so entirely unknown on the continent, cannot be considered an essential point in the symbolism of the degree. It is important in the systems in which it occurs but not essential. The true symbolism of the Royal Arch system is founded on the recovery of the *lost word*.

It can never be repeated too often that the Word is, in Masonry, the symbol of TRUTH. This TRUTH is the great object of pursuit in Masonry – the scope and tendency of all its investigations – the promised reward of all Masonic labor. Sought for diligently in every degree, and constantly approached, but never thoroughly and intimately embraced, until at length, in the Royal Arch, the veils which concealed the object of search from our view are withdrawn, and the inestimable prize is revealed.

This truth, which Masonry makes the great object of its investigations, is not the mere truth of science, or the truth of history, but is the more important truth which is synonymous with the knowledge of the nature of God, - that truth which is embraced in the sacred Tetragrammaton, or omnific name, including the signification of his eternal, past, present and future existence and to which he himself alluded when he declared unto Moses, “I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob by the name God Almighty; but by my name Jehovah was I not known unto them.”

The discovery of this truth is, then, the essential symbolism of the Royal Arch degree. Wherever it is practiced – and under some peculiar name the degree is found in every rite of Masonry – this symbolism is preserved. However the legend may vary, however the ceremonies of reception and the preliminary steps of initiation may differ, the consummation is always the same – the great discovery which represents the attainment of Truth.