

Where does the Masonic Lodge meet?

I begin with a bit of history that I'm sure most Masons are aware of: Masonic history records the beginning of the Grand Lodge of London and Westminster as being organized at the Goose and Gridiron on Saint John the Baptist Day, June 24, 1717. It was a combined meeting of the members of four local Lodges, referred to as 'The Four Old Lodges.' They were known by the names of the taverns or ale houses where they met. The distinction between an ale-house and a tavern, if there was any, is probably inconsequential for this presentation. The 'Four Old Lodges' are listed as having met at:

1. The Goose and Gridiron Ale-house near St. Paul's Churchyard.
2. The Crown Ale-house in Parker's Lane near Drury Lane.
3. The Apple-Tree Tavern in Charles Street, Covent Garden.
4. The Rummer and Grapes Tavern in Channel Row, Westminster.



'A Table Lodge' – The founding of the Grand Lodge at the Goose and Gridiron Ale House – 1717

Some would say the Table Lodge or Festive Board is historically and perhaps traditionally one of the essential elements of a successful Masonic meeting. I for one would have to agree having attended several over the last 35 years. If you take the opportunity to do some research about Table Lodges you will see common themes of singing, joke telling, toasts and Masonic fire. Some meetings apparently went on for hours. The members would dine, drink and eventually attend to the business at hand. One could assume then that the available drink assisted in suffering through the reading of the meeting minutes, bills and communications of the Lodge.

All of the Taverns were well known to the 'locals' as places of respite and refreshment. Signs marking the location and the services offered were the order of the day. Later on the owners of those taverns added additional symbols to note the fact that they were a member of the craft, and that a Lodge met at that tavern. The practice grew quickly and the familiar Square & Compasses was displayed prominently in a wide variety of signage.

Once you understand the significance of the square and compasses, you start to see them everywhere – in the city, along country roads, and on lodge buildings themselves. At a glance, they signify the existence of a lodge in a town, provide its name and indicate its location. Today's signs tend to be painted on metal, or sometimes feature neon or electric lights, but they are just the modern version of a very old Masonic tradition.

Looking back to the 1700s and 1800s, most Masonic signs were painted on wood and could often be found hanging outside the local tavern, usually above the main entrance. Virtually every town had a tavern in the 1700s and 1800s. They began by providing accommodations for travelers, but evolved into important community institutions providing food and drink, beds, stables for travelers, and entertainment, and meeting space for the ‘locals’.



Healy Tavern Sign, 1819,
New Hampshire

During the 1700s, few buildings were devoted exclusively to lodge meetings and activities. Many American Masons met in coffee houses or taverns, which were conveniently located in town centers, and always near major roadways. This makes it tempting to assume that a Masonic symbol on an antique tavern sign means that a lodge met in that building; however, research has shown that this was not always the case.



Courtesy: GL of Connecticut



Sometimes a Masonic symbol on a tavern sign merely indicated that the owner was a member of the Craft. During the early 1800s, a man's Masonic involvement was often understood as a sign of great prestige. Travelers saw the symbol and knew that the owner was a Mason who could be relied upon to provide good service at an honest price. Additionally, the use of Masonic symbols in such a visible way allowed lodges and members to generate interest in the lodge within their community. In a sense, these signs offered publicity, and allowed the fraternity to continue to grow and prosper through what I would call ‘creative marketing’.



German milk glass
circa 1838

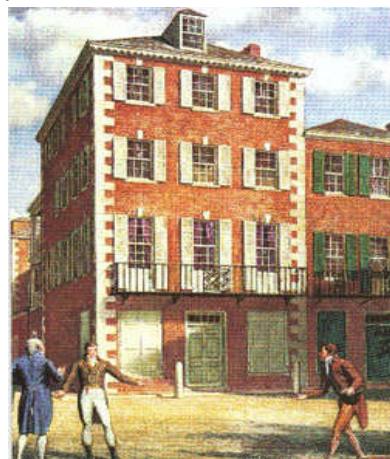


Masonic flask, circa 1829
'The Brazen Pillars'

From the early years, as Masons met in local taverns it was customary to partake of the liquid refreshment offered by the tavern. It was a place to gather for news of the day and political discussions that were so much a part of the times. The Masons' were responsible for their own drinking habits and many would have their own personal drinking flasks. Well into the late 1800's decorative flasks and '1/2 pints' were popular, some in various colors of glass and with symbols ranging from the usual square & compasses, to the brazen pillars, and the more common eagle & shield.

In The Grand Lodge of Massachusetts' archives there exists a copy of a 1721 newspaper account of local 'Masonic affairs', implying that Freemasonry was of public interest and that there were Freemasons in the colonies. Masons in the original Colonies met wherever they could find space. My research shows evidence of Masons meeting in New England town taverns from Maine, Connecticut, and New York, down the East coast through Pennsylvania into Maryland, and of course here in Virginia. The local tavern, often owned by a member of the Craft became *the* place to meet. From early Masonic history we know that Masonic Lodges met in homes as well as taverns. Most of the early Lodges had no buildings of their own simply because they couldn't afford the expense. Later when Masonry began to expand across America, Lodges began to buy or build their own meeting places.

Shepherd's Tavern in Charleston, South Carolina, was the birthplace of Scottish Rite Freemasonry. Of all the public houses in early Charleston, Shepherd's Tavern has the richest and most significant history. Charles Shepherd built his tavern around 1720. Shepherd's Tavern burned down during a fire in 1740, but after the ashes had cooled, it was rebuilt in the same spot using as many materials as could be saved from the original building. Masonic Lodges met in the building until the early 1900's.



Shepherd's Tavern in Charleston, circa 1725

Of course, Virginia Masons met in taverns as well. Archival records confirm that Freemasonry appeared in Norfolk around 1733, at Fredericksburg around 1750, and soon after that at Port Royal, Petersburg, and Hampton. Norfolk Lodge No.1, formerly Royal Exchange Lodge, constituted in 1733, assisted in forming the Grand Lodge of Virginia in 1778. It is presumed that traders from Britain, sea-captains and sojourners held occasional lodges according to ancient usage, from which our regularly chartered lodges naturally followed.

Williamsburg: The first Masonic records of the Williamsburg Lodge that have survived to this day indicate that the lodge in Williamsburg was certainly active and meeting in the Crown Tavern in 1762. The Crown Tavern stood on the south side of Duke of Gloucester Street, across from the Printing Office and Post Office.

Meetings were convivial affairs, and were often combined with eating and drinking, which gave rise to formal "Table Lodges". Just as in England, our "Table Lodges" became a rather formal feast which incorporated Masonic ritual, eating a lavish dinner, toasts offered between meal courses, some business being conducted, songs being sung, and general brotherly fun and fellowship. The tradition of conducting "Table Lodges" fell out of favor for well over a century but is being revived again by many lodges today.

The Williamsburg Masonic Lodge continued to meet at the Crown Tavern for several years before re-locating to the Market Square Tavern in 1773. It was in this building that the Grand Lodge of Virginia was started, in 1778, with John Blair, Jr., a Past Master of the Williamsburg Lodge, presiding as the first Grand Master.

By that time, this tavern was under the ownership of Gabriel Maupin, a lodge member, who was also a saddle and harness maker and the keeper of the Public Magazine, located next door to his establishment in Market Square. Maupin apparently rented a large room to the lodge for its meeting place for about two years, until the lodge was able to finish building a two story, wooden framed lodge hall on a nearby lot.



Williamsburg Lodge No. 6

In present day Colonial Williamsburg, stands a Masonic Hall on the corner of Francis and Queen Streets. This brick building is a Colonial style house with the Masonic emblem on the east side and a Masonic door knocker and sign at the front entrance.



Knock and it shall be opened...

Williamsburg Lodge No. 6 meets in this temple. It's a very active, regular lodge, but the officers do dress in Colonial costume. They meet on the 2nd Monday of the month and the web site cordially invites visitors to Colonial Williamsburg who are Masons to 'drop by.' There is also a 'breakfast & book club' meeting on the 4th Saturday of the month.

There is an extensive history of Williamsburg Masonic activity on the Lodge's web site, but the exact date when the present Lodge was first founded is not known. There is evidence that there was activity as early as the 1730s. Records in Fredericksburg Lodge #4 indicate the presence of a visiting brother from Williamsburg Lodge several times between 1752 and 1753. A charter had been given to Williamsburg Lodge, but it does not exist today. A "new" charter was petitioned and received in 1773, and is today the oldest surviving Masonic charter in Virginia.

Port Royal: In April of 1754, a Lodge at Port Royal was organized by the eight to ten Masons who had been meeting in the tavern of Dorothy Roy. In May of that year, the Lodge made application to Kilwinning Lodge in Scotland for a charter. The request was framed by the Junior Warden, Brother John Crosse, and was sent to his father, David, a member of "Mother" Kilwinning Lodge near Glasgow. The Grand Lodge of Scotland honored this request and on December 1, 1755, granted the Lodge at Port Royal a charter, with the rather cumbersome name of "Kilwinning Port Royal Crosse Lodge." This was the first charter granted by the Grand Lodge of Scotland to a Lodge in the American colonies. The original 1775 charter has survived and is now in the archives of the Grand Lodge of Virginia.

During its early years, the Lodge at Port Royal met in various taverns and private residences in the town. For reasons unclear, the Lodge went dark in 1848, but very shortly thereafter attempted to resume its labors, and was granted a dispensation by the Grand Lodge.

Fredericksburg: Fredericksburg Lodge is one of two Lodges to be considered "Time Immemorial" or "having existed a time before legal history, and beyond legal memory"; functioning without a Charter. Lodge No. 4 held its first recorded meeting on September 1, 1752, with 13 members present. The record book still exists today and is in possession of the lodge. Brother George Washington received all of his Blue Lodge degrees in Fredericksburg beginning in November of 1752. The first recorded conferral of the Royal Arch Degree in the New World took place here on December 20, 1753, and that record is part of the archives in the Lodge museum.

Over the years this lodge has had several 'homes'. Beginning in 1756 it met at a tavern on the northeast corner of Amelia and Caroline Streets. This tavern at the time was owned by Charles Julian, who was a member of the lodge.



Fredericksburg Lodge No. 4,
circa 1816

Winchester: On October 1, 1768, the Provincial Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania granted a warrant, or charter, to a number of Masons living in or near Winchester to form a Lodge, to be known as Winchester Lodge No. 12. This was the first Masonic Lodge established west of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and the first in Virginia to be designated by a number. However, it was not until December 1807 that Winchester Lodge No. 12 became Winchester Hiram Lodge No. 21 under the jurisdiction of the Grand Lodge of Virginia.



Winchester-Hiram Lodge 21

The first meetings were held at John Sexton's Tavern, later at various places. In 1809, when the community wished to build a market house, the Lodge assisted financially in the project and had a room in the building for its use. In 1821, the old Market House was razed and a new Market House built. The Lodge again assisted and secured a meeting room in the new structure.



Frescoes in Winchester-Hiram Lodge



The present Winchester Lodge building is downtown in the 'market' area of the Old City and is resplendent with beautiful Masonic frescoes on the walls and ceiling. The colors are as bright today as when they were first applied, although they are nearly 140 years old and have never been retouched.

Yorktown: Across the street from the Courthouse in Yorktown was the Swan Tavern, where a Masonic lodge was meeting on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays under warrant from the Grand Lodge at London, dated August 1, 1755. Yorktown's meeting site changed frequently during the city's occupation by British forces.

So, where did the Lodges meet? Our brethren of the early times gathered wherever they could in order to conduct the business of the Lodge, enjoy each others company and share some of the 'spirits of fellowship'. Early Taverns and Ale Houses played a major part in the growth and advancement of the Craft in the Colonies. For that, we owe a toast...to our Masonic Brothers!



A mini-nugget from the Quarry...

Douglas Messimer, PM, Tuckahoe Lodge 347 3/11

Sources:

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Winchester-Hiram Lodge 21

Williamsburg Lodge 6

Fredericksburg Lodge 4