

## Some Challenges of Presenting Freemasonry through a Public History Exhibition

*“It is necessary there should be Wisdom to contrive, Strength to support, and Beauty to adorn all great and important undertakings.”*

Across America are numerous collections of Masonic objects and historical artifacts. Most of these objects are displayed in Grand Lodge buildings and libraries, some are in local temples, while a few appear in history and art museums. But what is the purpose of these display cases filled with old aprons, past-masters jewels, fine porcelain and countless badges from conventions and conclaves? Are they simply "curiosity cabinets" for Freemasons to show their activities and travel souvenirs? Are they decorations and ornaments that enhance the grandeur and beauty of lodges? Or are these massed artifacts expected to impress people of the fraternity's legitimacy and ancient heritage just as some families' display their coat of arms or genealogy charts? Do these Masonic artifacts have real historic value? Do they teach, inspire or are they simply nice things to please the eye? This article will explain how the National Heritage Museum (NHM) sought to answer these questions by creating a new interpretation of Masonic artifacts in an exhibition that would both explain Freemasonry and tell its history.

The National Heritage Museum (formerly the Museum of Our National Heritage) located in Lexington, Massachusetts was built by the Scottish Rite Masons of the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction in 1975. A gift to the American people during the Bicentennial celebration, the museum has presented over 275 exhibitions with American history topics ranging from the colonial period furniture to Route 66 Highway. The museum also inherited the Scottish Rite's large Masonic library, collection of historic artifacts and invaluable Supreme Council, N.M.J., archives. These materials became the foundation of the museum's broader collections and naturally lead to presenting Masonic history as part of its overall mission. In the last 25 years the museum expanded this mission to include other American fraternal organizations, such as the Odd Fellows, Knights of Pythias and the Grange. Through this process it has become the only museum in the country that actively acquires preserves and presents the history of American fraternal organizations. While many fraternal organizations collect their own history, the National Heritage Museum not only holds artifacts from Freemasonry, but also the Sons of Temperance, and Ancient Order of Hibernians to the Loyal Order of Moose, Rotary International, and many others.

The museum with its library and archives, holds over 15,000 artifacts, books and archives—postcards, minute books, rituals, aprons, badges, costumes, photographs and furniture. The museum has presented over twelve fraternal related exhibitions from these collections, most of which focused on Masonic symbols in decorative or fine arts or as overviews to the American phenomenon of ritual-based fraternal organizations. The first exhibits curated by Barbara Franco, “Masonic Symbols in American Decorative Arts” and “Decorated Masonic Aprons,” remain important contributions to bringing the history

of the Craft to connoisseurs and collectors. The museum continued this tradition through its 2000 exhibition "Stitched Symbols: Quilts from the Collections." The museum's second curator, John Hamilton, continued Franco's legacy of building the Masonic decorative arts collections, but he also presented the panorama of Masonic and fraternal organizations. His notable works include his book "The Material Culture of American Freemasonry" and the 1995 exhibition "Initiating America: Three Centuries of American Lodge Life."

When John Ott became the museum's executive director in 1999, "Initiating America" had been up for more than four years and he suggested starting a new strictly Blue Lodge Masonic exhibition project. At that time I had only worked at the museum for five months and had been a Freemason for only eighteen. Hired as the assistant curator, I soon found myself the institution's sole "Masonic expert," when John Hamilton left for a director's job at another museum. While intimidated by the prospect of curating my first exhibition and one on a subject I had limited knowledge I was enthusiastic to employ my education and the experience I had acquired working in two other historical societies.

My association with the National Heritage Museum began in 1995 when I completed a graduate school internship cataloging dozens of the museum's Masonic and fraternal officers' jewels. While in Duquesne University's museum studies program I was working full-time at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in Pittsburgh. At the historical society I worked with a team of curators, historians, and designers to present an exhibition on the whole history of the region. The goal of this exhibition was to present not only famous Pittsburghers, such as Andrew Carnegie, but also common folks who worked in his steel mills. Often called "social history," this form of exhibition interpretation presents the lives and artifacts of a wide range of people, allowing visitors to understand different and often conflicting perspectives on historical forces and events. Working on exhibitions at the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania and studying American history in graduate school convinced me that American fraternalism was an important avenue to understand the growth and development of America's most elusive group, the great middle class.

After graduating from Duquesne University I was hired by the Missouri Historical Society in 1997 to help organize the object collections for a large (20,000 square foot) exhibition on the whole history of Saint Louis. Though only there for two years I continued my education in social history while studying American fraternalism and staying in contact with MNH staff. Most importantly, I was also able to travel frequently to my hometown of Burlington, Iowa and through family friends and dispensation from the Grand Lodge of Missouri I was made a mason in Malta Lodge #318 in June 1998. In 1999 I was hired as the assistant curator and I soon moved to Lexington and began inventorying and cataloging the collections.

Although enthusiastic to curate a new Masonic exhibition I quickly realized that I would need a great deal of support and advice to make it successful. Fortunately the museum's staff of educators, librarians, registrars, the designer, and collections managers, all provided vital and invaluable support. I also solicited outside historians and Freemasons to act as consultants for the project. By December 1999 Stephen Bullock,

Barbara Franco, Brent Morris, Thomas W. Jackson and William D. Moore, among others, all agreed to review the exhibition's scripts and suggest important artifacts for display.

## FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEMS OF MASONIC EXHIBITIONS

My first task in the exhibition process was to begin a rough script, but I was quickly confronted by a fundamental dilemma. Should the exhibition consist of wonderful and beautiful Masonic artifacts that would explain what Freemasonry teaches and how it operates, or should it be the history of American Freemasonry presented through the common artifacts of generations of men who joined the Craft? In other words, should the exhibition attempt a specific explanation of Freemasonry through its timeless symbols, tenets, and founding brothers or should it provide a broader understanding of the Craft through ever-changing memberships' activities, rites and auxiliaries, and ordinary objects? While both interpretations would please Freemasons, the first would largely appeal to historians and connoisseurs; the second might attract a broader audience who could learn about the Craft and perhaps something about Freemasons in their family or the Masonic lodge in their community.

Contemplating these two presentations lead to a third question: what would be the point of view or the voice of the exhibition? Would the story be told from a historian's point of view or a Freemason's? As a historian I had the responsibility to present a fair and balanced account of Freemasonry in America. If we discussed George Washington as a Freemason then we must also mention Benedict Arnold or discuss the Anti-Masonic period. If we talked about Masonic "brotherly love" and the universality of Masonry then we must also address Prince Hall Freemasonry, women and atheists. But would this move the exhibit away from a historical exhibition and instead become a debate on the merits and misdeeds of the fraternity? Would that mean I would have to assume the role of an official spokesman for the fraternity? Might this cause the exhibition to be viewed simply as apologetic or a glorification of the Craft? Also I was concern that if I purposely set about addressing controversial issues, would the exhibit become bogged down trying to explain every visitor's question or misconception?

I began my first exhibition script drafts, with these issues and a preliminary opening date of July 2001. Over the course of the next several months I tried several different approaches balancing between Masonic explanations and American History. My first ideas to display three period Masonic lodge rooms: an 1800s Eastern lodge, a 1900s Midwestern lodge and 21<sup>st</sup> century Western lodge. These rooms would show Freemasonry evolving with the nation, while showing that the ritual and symbols remained unchanged through history. The museum staff and outside consultants quickly pointed out the difficulty of fabricating such displays and the apprehension many visitors might have having entering a ritual space. Although this idea never came to fruition, exploring it enabled me to get a clearer vision of the realities of an exhibition's limits of time, money and space.

By April of 2000 I had begun a complete script revamp to find a new solution. With the help of the new director of exhibition, Hilary Anderson, the exhibition's opening

date was moved to February 2002, and the exhibition's mission was narrowed to answering two basic questions: What is Freemasonry? And why do men join?

The first question would provide the means to present Masonic symbols, tenets and even quotes from the rituals. The second question would provide the historical component allowing an understanding that the reasons men have joined have changed over time. If the visitor left the exhibit with satisfactory answers to these questions then the exhibition would be successful.

A third issue, integrity of presentation or reporting versus promotion, would be incorporated into the mission and interwoven through each case, object, and label. There would be no one place where the exhibit would state: "we are reporting historical facts" or "we are promoting Freemasonry." Rather the visitor would come to trust the presentation only by how honestly we answered the two questions. We hoped that if the visitor knew about Freemasonry and agreed with our explanation, then they would trust our history. Or if a visitor knew history and agreed with our interpretation, then they would trust our explanation of Freemasonry. We also accepted zealous anti-masons or conspiracy paranoids would never fully trust our explanation of neither the Craft nor our history regardless of our earnestness. The exhibition objectivity might be perceived as tainted by its location in a museum almost wholly funded by Freemasons. But we hoped mistrustful visitors, at least, might ask themselves: "If Freemasonry is a secret society, why am I learning about it in a Masonic exhibition within a free public museum built by Freemasons?"

#### USE OF "CONTEXT" IN THE PRESENTATION

By discussing what visitors wanted to learn, we found a key to presenting the unfamiliar subject of Freemasonry: context provided clarity. By surrounding the unfamiliar with the familiar visitors could feel comfortable encountering new ideas. This is not a new technique to Freemasonry. Through its adoration of George Washington and other famous American masons the fraternity has done it for years. Both Barbara Franco and John Hamilton also used this technique in their exhibitions by displaying familiar furniture and furnishings decorated with Masonic symbols.

In this exhibition, however, we would use Masonic symbols as they appeared in their broader applications. For example, Rhode Island uses the anchor of hope and Utah uses the beehive of industry in their state seal. Different religions use the all-seeing eye, while many trade unions use clasped hands or tools in their logos. In this manner, we considered using the Great Seal on the dollar bill as the exhibition's introductory image.

On the history side we would use chronology to contextualise the reasons why men joined the fraternity. Again, Masonic scholars have always used this technique. It is no surprise that Masonic membership rose with General George Washington, declined after the Morgan Affair or rose again as masons Garfield and McKinley and Roosevelt were elected presidents.

But in this exhibition we would tie the reasons for joining the Craft to broader movements and changes. The Shrine, for example, could not have created a national

organization for affluent and fun loving men without abundant leisure time, or the communication and transportation networks of the late 1800s Industrial Age.

Additionally, the development of large cities, a separate youth culture, the Jazz Age and the precedent of the Boy Scouts all caused the formation of DeMolay for Boys, Rainbow Girls, and Job's daughters in the 1920s.

The exhibition would answer the larger question of why anyone would join any fraternal organization, through an introduction of non-Masonic and Masonic affiliated organizations. If the visitor could answer this question, then they would understand why men would join Freemasonry.

The seven answers to this question became self-improvement, performing rituals, mutual benefit, social activities, business connections, family participation and community service. If a visitor understood why Freemason Melvin Jones started Lions International or James Davis 33° built the Loyal Order of Moose then they would understand why millions of ordinary men joined Freemasonry.

Presenting an organizational overview helped answer the first question of explaining what Freemasonry is. Displaying symbols, tenets, and activities of the Knights of Columbus, Rotary International, the Elks and other familiar organizations, visitors would thereby understand two facts. First, that these organizations are similar to Freemasonry and second, their symbols, logos, and emblems often derived from Freemasonry because most of them were founded by masons. Lastly with such a spectrum of organizations, visitors might even make a second deductive leap: If the Elks and Rotarians are not in a great conspiracy to run the world and Freemasonry is similar to these friendly societies, then Freemasons are also not out to rule the world.

But as I challenged non-mason visitors, I would also challenge masons. I wanted my brothers to understand how the Craft has radically changed from the day George Washington laid the cornerstone of the United States Capital. Rather than seeing the usual parade of great Americans who joined a lodge, they would witness Americans taking the lessons of the Craft to create new organizations. Some of these, like DeMolay, the Shrine or Eastern Star are part of the fraternity, but others such as the Elks, B'nai B'rith, or the Grange are not Masonic.

By incorporating symbolic, historical and fraternal context the exhibition crossed a great hurdle and in July 2000 I completed a new script with a strong mission statement: "This exhibit will explain what Blue Lodge Freemasonry is and why men have joined it for 250 years. It will achieve this through highlighting other familiar voluntary organizations that exemplify Masonic qualities. By understanding that men join organizations with a specific purpose, a visitor will understand why men join Freemasonry, which has many purposes. The birth, growth and evolution or decline of all the voluntary organizations will provide the historical component."

## THEMATIC VERSUS CHRONOLOGICAL

The result of the consultants' review, however, created a new concern: whether to present a thematic or chronological exhibition. While the Masonic consultants tended to prefer chronology, the academics leaned toward thematic. On the one hand, the reasons

men joined the fraternity would be tied to dates and events. On the other, they would be tied to such issues as class, race, gender, immigration, the development of cities and industrial, consumer, or service economies.

Trying to find a solution to this dilemma, I understood a chronology necessary in exhibitions where visitors often have a vague understanding of the span of years between the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address (four score and seven) or between General George Custer and General George Patton. Visitors also like to see timelines and artifacts showing an evolution from the "bad old days" to the "good new ones." Using a chronology exhibition would create a continuum of famous Freemasons from Benjamin Franklin to Michael Richards.

On the pro thematic side, such historical forces as industrialization, urbanization, gender, class and race have had far greater impact on Freemasonry than most great events or men. Certainly slavery and segregation are why there are Prince Hall lodges. The dangers and death of factories, mines and railroads of the 1800s prompted Freemasons to build orphanages and hospitals. The development of great corporations and white-collar professions and the suburbs are why Masonic square clubs, High Twelve International flourished and Grand Lodges emphasized community service projects.

I realized that the exhibition would have enough trouble explaining Freemasonry without also having to explain urbanization, industrialization, and immigration versus migration so I decided on a chronological presentation. If the exhibition's subject was familiar to most people – such as the telephone or department stores or jazz music—then we might have attempted a more sophisticated approach. My decision was confirmed by trying to place the timelessness of Masonic symbols and rituals into dynamic American cultural forces. This proved impossible, for part of Freemasonry's purpose is to be a refuge from the outside world. Lodge minutes rarely record current events or mention local or national matters.

In search of a solution to this dilemma, I nonetheless attempted to place certain thematic issues into a chronology of why men join, and to my surprise, it solved the whole issue! It became apparent that men joined Freemasonry in the 1840s and 50s more for self-improvement, than say performing the ritual. "Mutual-benefit plans were particularly attractive in the late 1800s before social security, unions and HMOs and community service became more important during the Great Depression and World War II. Certain thematic issues tied nicely to these time periods and the reasons for joining. Immigration and migration was important in the 1850s, industrialization in the 1880s, and urbanization in the 1910s.

But where to include race, gender, class and other classifications in the exhibit? I had already determined to tell the story of Prince Hall Freemasonry beginning in the first display cases and along the way I then decided to add Masonic and other women's organizations, ethnic fraternities, and leaders of trade unions who were Freemasons. While purposely displaying Masonic and American diversity I also accepted the fact that the majority of the exhibit's historical figures would be white Protestant men. If visitors received the impression that most American masons are white and Protestant, that would be completely acceptable, for it is a fact. But I also hoped visitors might receive two

additional impressions; white Protestant men taught generations of dissimilar Americans to organize and grow their own volunteer organizations. Second (and contrary to recent popular perceptions) white Protestant men have done many good and generous things and continue to live charitably toward people all over the world.

## EXHIBITION DESIGN AND PRESENTATION

Throughout these long discussions of interpretation and presentation, we had to remember we were creating a three-dimensional multi-sensory public experience, not writing a book or preparing a college seminar. Knowing that most visitors spend less than 30 minutes in an exhibit, the story must be succinct and engaging. The gallery space was also only 1,500 square feet and had to accommodate hundreds of objects, photographs, prints, labels, and of course, allow visitors easy passage. As one of the museum's four galleries, the exhibition should also compliment and enhance a patron's complete visit.

The first concern in designing the gallery was to make the exhibit an inviting and comfortable atmosphere for people to both learn and enjoy. The museum's reputation of presenting popular history exhibitions, such as the American Dinner, Summer Camps, and Route 66, provided the perfect model. Much of Freemasonry's public relations problem lies in its history books that are usually written by Masons for Masons, thereby being inherently inaccessible to the general public and professional historians. This tradition and the Craft's secrecy have caused many to believe the fraternity was exclusive and odd. Through a successful exhibit design we hoped to present American Freemasonry as accessible and mainstream as other American institutions, such as country fairs, nightclubs, softball leagues and grass-roots action committees.

The second concern was to ensure the exhibit answered the visitor's most basic questions. While reading numerous Masonic Internet sites and Grand Lodge brochures helped, the staff also conducted a visitor's survey to determine what, if anything, they knew about Freemasonry. The results were incorporated into the exhibition's mission and helped determine its educational goals. Beyond enjoying the tour of the gallery we also wanted visitors to understand three things: Freemasons are not stonemasons, the fraternity's membership requirements, and that Freemasons meet in private but are not secretive, among others.

Combining ideas from all these lines of thought led to a cityscape design. Rather than forcing visitors to walk through Masonic temples we would place one temple among a variety of buildings. Each building would be a façade for a display case area. Visitors could then choose which "buildings" to enter and how they wished to understand Freemasonry. In this manner the exhibit avoided "initiating" visitors through a lodge room or a forceful presentation of ritual regalia. It also avoided the cliché presentation of Freemasonry as "mysterious" and "weird" and Masonic temples as "dark and dank." Rather, the exhibit's answers and the fraternity would appear in the bright sunshine of cityscape's public square. By first seeing familiar architecture, common symbols and popular history visitors would be more at ease and receptive to understand Freemasonry.

The new design began with a typical American town roadside "welcome" sign that displayed the emblems of the various community organizations. The Masonic

emblem of square compasses and “G” would be in the center with support bars branching out to other non-Masonic but similar groups, such as the Rotary, Knights of Columbus and the Moose. Borrowing from Sinclair Lewis’ novel *Babbitt*, I named the town “Zenith.” Passing the road sign they would enter the gallery and introductory section. Set the early 1800s, it would include a tavern that displayed a master’s chair, lodge altar, other furnishing and officers’ jewel. In this abbreviated “lodge,” visitors would receive a sufficient grasp of the Masonic vocabulary, symbols, and tenets to recognize and understand them as they traveled through the rest of the exhibition. The exhibition’s main section, set in circa 1900, would explain the seven primary reasons men joined Freemasonry or anyone joined similar organizations. Each “building” display case would relate to the reason for joining. For example, artifacts explaining Masonic self-improvement activities, such as ritual lectures, leadership training, books and libraries would be in Zenith’s school. Visitors could also view other self-improvement from 1840s temperance leagues to present-day Toastmasters International. Other buildings would include a dance hall for social activities, a factory for mutual benefit and an office building for business and professional networking. Smaller displays would include individual children, women and African Americans who used Freemasonry as the model to build separate organizations, such as college fraternities, the Girl Scouts, the P.E.O. Sisterhood or the Knights of Tabor.

#### CONCLUDING THE EXHIBITION

How to conclude the exhibition caused another dilemma. While it was agreed its “building” display cases should be of a modern design, we had to decide if it would explain the present state of American Freemasonry, make a prediction on its future or an alternative. As a Freemason, I did not want to end the exhibition with graphs showing declining membership and growing number of lodge closings. As a historian, I look back in time and did not want to make a prediction on the future of the Craft and other American volunteer organizations. Initially, I considered simply a series informational computer kiosks where visitors could get more of their questions answered. As a history exhibit, however, I was obliged to present artifacts more than information. I needed to make some sort of conclusion and unify the exhibition through a central argument.

Wrestling with the ending, I considered ways the general public might have had contact with Freemasonry or Freemasons. Shriners and the shrine hospitals came to mind, as well as other Masonic charitable activities such as hospitals, scholarships, disaster relief and museums and libraries. Other Masonic related bodies, such as Jobs’ Daughters or Eastern Star, and even lodge officer installations or funeral services, all might connect a person’s memory to Freemasonry.

Concurrently, I became aware that all the non-Masonic fraternal context might leave the visitor with the impression that Freemasonry was absolutely no different than the Loyal Order of Moose, Rotary International or acting in an amateur theater company. Certainly many organizations provide charity and support to their members, some even have hospitals and homes, while most hold conventions, march in parades, have auxiliaries, and initiation rituals. If the exhibit retained a broad range of organizations



surrounding Freemasonry, then another question would have to be answered: what distinguishes Freemasonry as an American institution?

After much thought I concluded that two overall factors distinguished Freemasonry. First its rituals, not just the three degrees but the York Rite's complexity and the Scottish Rite's grand productions, taught a complex philosophy and morality unmatched in any association. Within this complex system is Freemasonry's unique "world-view" that reveres King Solomon's Temple and other "valuable monument of antiquity" "ravaged by barbarian forces." As conveyed by its "symbols most expressive" Freemasonry has a specific neoclassical aesthetic with an expressed purpose to enlighten men who will not only defend society against "the ruthless hand of ignorance" but also build it with "wisdom, strength, and beauty."

The other distinguishing feature of the Craft is its charity. All groups or clubs create brotherly love and affection in their gatherings, but Freemasonry encourages its members to travel to other lodges and requires its members to go to a brother in need. In other forms of charity Freemasonry excels all others. No other American volunteer association can match the amount of money that is donated annually. No other fraternity is broader in its giving from aiding individual "poor and distressed brothers" to maintaining hospitals, homes and libraries and museums. And no other fraternity is as universal in giving help, aid and assistance regardless of Masonic affiliation, race, nationality, sex, age, religion or wealth.

Masonic charity and its complex rituals, which teach charity, became the answer for the exhibition conclusion. The conclusion became a presentation of modern Masonic charity. In this manner the visitor might under its true purpose and understand why Freemasons do the work they do. This explanation pointed to Masonry's standard purpose of "making good men better" through rituals that create a fraternity of charitable men, rather than simply a charitable organization governed by initiated men. This conclusion would avoid making predictions for the future of the Craft and also help alleviate Mason's anxiety over their declining membership by showing it actively responding to the needs of others. Furthermore, like grandparents, masons could also be justly proud of their progeny and posterity of their work. Masonic charity has taught generations of Americans to found and build countless new charitable organizations that have helped tens of millions of people.

This new script also allowed a reincorporating of Masonic structure and symbolism to the design. By viewing the exhibition's three sections as the three degrees I went from displaying tracing boards from three centuries to turning the whole gallery into a walk-through tracing board. The introductory section became the first degree with three display areas and a mannequin in 1800 costume wearing a Masonic apron and holding a twenty-four inch gauge and a gavel. The second section's seven "buildings" were named after the seven liberal arts and sciences – such as a grammar school and a music hall, while each façade used one of the five orders of architecture. The final section would use third degree emblems and relate to the five points of fellowship.

While part of this Masonic incorporation was out of my enthusiasm for symbols and rituals it also stemmed from wanting to open the Craft up to visitors as far as I could

without violating my obligation. The exhibit would be unified under one theme by combining Masonic universal charity with its charity-teaching symbols and ritual quotes.

A revised script draft was circulating to staff and consultants in December 2000. I was surprised when they did not share my enthusiasm. The staff and non-Masonic historians felt that charity was too complex a theme and the symbols too numerous for visitors to grasp in a small exhibition. Even the Masonic consultants thought I was troweling on the symbolism too thick to be helpful and one particular Pennsylvanian consultant was concerned about seeing too much ritual in print.

## "COMMUNITY" TO UNIFY THE EXHIBITION

The discussion that followed the review of my new draft brought a new self-evident, unifying and final theme: community. Rather than concentrating on a Masonic landscape or a gallery size "tracing board," we would concentrate on the community "building" display cases that create a gallery size "town." Just as visitors would move in and out of the display areas, the exhibition using "community" would move from the private community of a lodge to public communities of family, friends and work. "Community" could also be used to describe the lodges that make a Grand Lodge, the community of other volunteer associations, or even the American neighborhoods, cities, counties that make the community of the United States.

The interaction between the Masonic communities and America's communities also established the driving historical argument. The exhibition would show how Freemasonry affected, and was affected by, communities in America. Masonically speaking it means American men traveling from west to east and back again to help, aid, and assist others. Visitors could then see how Freemasons have used the Craft's tenets and principles to practice countless charitable activities and found new organizations that sustain present-day communities. Conversely, brothers often brought outside trends and innovations into the lodge and changed the fraternity leading to the advent of the Shrine, Eastern Star and many other new forms and traditions.

The exhibition therefore had two themes: American community building and American Freemasonry. The primary theme created the exhibit's history component. By understanding why and how the country grew, through immigration, industrialization, urbanization, etc., the visitor would understand the forces that brought people together in organizations and why men join Freemasonry. This context provided honest, simple history and answers that might alleviate most visitors' suspicions and misconceptions. This context would allow visitors to learn of Masonry's past discrimination of African Americans, for example, and not be surprised, since at that time the whole country practiced slavery and segregation. Conversely, while Freemasons and Americans regret such history, displaying recent activities would help dispel the misconception that Freemasonry is inherently racist.

Community would successfully answer the second theme of what Freemasonry stands for. By explaining Freemasonry as groups of men who meet for a variety of reasons the exhibition could achieve its educational goals. Most importantly, visitors would also learn what Freemasonry is not. It is not a secret society like a hate group; not

stonemasons like a union; not religious like a church, nor political like a public caucus, but simply a fraternity.

This fraternity was not defined, however, by famous Freemasons, such as George Washington, Andrew Jackson or Harry Truman, but by three centuries of ordinary men doing extraordinary things in their communities. Through practicing Freemasonry's universal philosophy, spirituality, membership and charity, the uniquely American form of fraternity was established.

The staff and consultants made another insightful comment on the script. They suggested reducing the exhibition's number of non-Masonic organizations. This achieved several things, first it kept the focus squarely on Freemasonry while reducing the amount of research and number of artifacts that would need collecting. Perhaps more importantly the need to inundate the gallery with Masonic symbols and rituals would disappear. By trimming away the underbrush and thinning the forest of symbols the Masonic trees could be clearly seen.

In the process of chopping a third of the display cases, the final unifying theme did indeed emerge. While the three exhibit sections retained a connection to the three degrees, the three Masonic tenets of brotherly love, relief and truth would connect Freemasonry's birth, the reasons why men join and its modern activities. Initially they were used to explain the origins of Freemasonry in three distinct communities: religious faith, stonemasons' work and Enlightenment philosophy. From Judeo-Christianity the Craft received brotherly love, from the stonemasons relief and from the Enlightenment truth. Represented by the Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian orders in architecture, these communities became the sources for Freemasonry's "wisdom to contrive, strength to build, and beauty to adorn." The creation of the Premiere Grand Lodge in 1717 thereby came about, for simplicity's sake, through these communities' common reverence for King Solomon's Temple.

The Premiere Grand Lodge was the point from which the line traveled to the founding American colonial lodges. Employing the tenets in the 1800s and 1900s Masons built a "superfice" of countless new Masonic organizations. Brotherly Love led to family and social organizations, relief lead to Masonic homes and hospitals, and truth lead to self-improvement Masonic libraries and research lodges. By 1950, solid Masonic charitable institutions, sustained by the tenets, adorned America.

#### SELECTING OBJECTS FOR DISPLAY

In March 2001, the exhibition script was at last complete with two strong themes of Freemasonry and American community to guide the interpretation. After moving the opening date back one last time to June 2002, we now had to select, locate, and prepare artifacts for display. This process is the culmination of a museum curator's vocation. His choices must not only show physical evidence that supports and carries the exhibit's thesis but they should also be intriguing, fun, sometime unique, sometimes ordinary, sometimes familiar and sometimes strange. Exhibitions show things, not simply describe them.

Studying past Masonic exhibitions and visiting lodge and Grand Lodge museums reinforced the lessons I learned working at the historical societies in Pittsburgh and Saint Louis. Many of these displays simply showed cases filled with old Masonic “stuff.” While many Freemasons might view these objects with pride or in fond remembrance of past events or brothers, to non-Masons they are just old souvenirs and remnants decorated with odd symbols. Lastly, such deluges of odd aprons and jewels may seem boring to most visitors. The challenge for this exhibition would be to find a way to present this “stuff” of history that would bring it to life.

To me, all Masonic artifacts are ultimately physical evidence of the abstract concept of fraternity. Aprons, jewels, certificates, commemorative plates, reunion badges, and much more are all proof of the millions of Freemasons who practiced the tenets of their profession. They speak of friendships that lasted a lifetime. Friendships that often began at initiation, survived and grew through good times and bad, and ended with a deposit of an evergreen sprig at the grave. But within the gallery, I had to tell these wonderful stories through a few choice objects. Just two or three aprons, possibly displayed on tuxedoed mannequins, might attract and engage the visitor far better than long walls with dozens of framed aprons owned by unidentified men.

With this goal in mind we established several criteria to guide the object selection process. First, visitors prefer to see genuine things made, owned, and used by genuine people. It would not be enough to display something beautiful, say a Past Master’s jewel, unless visitors could learn something about the man who wore it. Second, we wanted a variety of types of artifacts. They should range from fine art and decorative arts and furniture to unique lodge furnishings, common household objects and the ephemera of daily life- such as lodge notices and dues cards. We also wanted objects made of a variety of materials, from wood, stone, silver, and paint to textiles, and even videotape. But of these, perhaps the most important would be photographs that showed groups of masons in the lodge, at banquets, and active in communities. Through these images we would demonstrate the popularity and presence of Freemasonry in America.

Third, as dictated by the exhibition’s scope, we would have artifacts spanning three centuries—from at least 1717 up to 2001. The last criterion was to include things from as many states as possible. In this way we would reinforce the universality of Freemasonry, the concept of American community, and perhaps peak the interest of vacationing visitors by showing them something from their home state.

Throughout the long development process we continued to identify many key items. Certainly we would include a copy of a first edition of Anderson’s *Constitutions*, a set of silver lodge officers’ jewels made by Paul Revere, and other famous Masonic objects from around the country. But because the museum’s collections were weaker in 20<sup>th</sup> century Masonic and in other organizations’ objects, we had to acquire or borrow most of the objects. We created a computer database to organize and track the hundreds of objects for potential display. Through the database, we could determine how many aprons or gavels, porcelain versus wood objects and how many we had in-house or how many we must find or borrow.

For more representational objects, such as a photograph of a Masonic banquet, we assigned them to states not yet present in the exhibition. By connecting the database with a mailing list we could contact Grand Lodges, Scottish Rite valleys or other Masonic bodies asking for a specific object. From its creation the database included over a thousand entries, ranging from wishes and rumors to genuine artifacts ready for display. Slowly over a two-year period the availability and information on objects became concrete. Many desired objects, such as Justice Thurgood Marshall's Masonic apron, simply did not exist, while others, such as 33° rings, we had by the bushel.

While the hunt for desired artifacts concentrated in the museum's and Grand Lodges' collections, we also contacted 25 states and local museums and historical societies, such as the Detroit Institute of Art and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City. We also worked with the non-Masonic organizations and receive great cooperation from the Loyal Order of Moose and Rotary International, among others. Lastly, we used Internet auction sites and a network of antique dealers to acquire many objects.

By October 2001, we had achieved most of our selection criteria. Objects came from over 35 states, numerous Masonic organization, ranging through many styles, types and materials and in age spanning from a stone from Jerusalem's Temple Mount to a letter thanking masons for contributing to the 9/11/ 2001 disaster relief.

Throughout the various script drafts and interpretive points the database of objects was continually modified. In the end, all the objects had to be reconciled with the exhibition's design and gallery's limited space. Even up until the last two weeks before the opening some objects had to be cut from the show. From a total number of over 1,000 objects, slowly the number was reduced in stages until less than 200 are now on display.

## NAMING THE EXHIBITION

With the script finished and the design drawn up we still had to decide upon an exhibition title. Using the educational goals and the key words Freemasonry, community, and America, it became a matter of word play but also an exercise in conveying the right meaning to each word used. Through many drafts we decided upon: "To Build and Sustain: Freemasons in American Community."

The first half: "To Build and Sustain" alludes to an explanation of what Freemasonry is. Building is what operative stonemasons do, but it is also what speculative masons do. While stonemasons construct buildings in a community, Freemasons build better men in a fraternity. The title shows Freemasonry to be an active or "hands-on" organization, not a passive self-absorbed affiliation.

But Freemasons do more than just build they build to last. Unlike other craftsmen's work, the buildings erected by our "ancient" operative brethren are still in use. Freemasonry as a fraternity has also endured through wars and revolutions, good times and bad. The profound endurance of Freemasonry alludes to "sustain" in the exhibit's title. Freemasons are forever sustaining their fraternity through continual application of time, money, work, and other forms of charity. It also supports the exhibition's mission to explain what Freemasonry is by presenting its rituals, symbols,

lectures and specifically the three principle supports of a lodge: wisdom, strength and beauty. In fact "Build and Sustain" is a shortened version of a suggested title: "Building with Wisdom Strength and Beauty: Freemasons in American Community."

Lastly, "Build and Sustain" alludes to the three communities Freemasonry received its three tenets of brotherly love, relief and truth. From religion we learn of brotherly love or "The brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God." From stonemasons the notion of relief or mutual benefit became "the basis we form our friendship and establish our connections." And from the early scientist like Benjamin Franklin and Elias Ashmole "we learn to be good and true... and by its dictates endeavor to regulate our conduct."

The title's second half "Freemasons in American Community" answers who builds and sustains and reveals the exhibit's real purpose. First we chose the word Freemasons over Freemasonry, for it is the men who are members of the fraternity rather than the fraternity itself that does the work. An organization can have millions of dollars, beautiful rituals and good moral principles, but without dedicated members it is not a fraternity and it achieves nothing. The visitors must understand that Freemasonry consists not of symbols or things, but is comprised of men. This exhibit, therefore, is the story of men who attend Masonic lodge meetings once a month, but spend the rest of their days living the tenets of their Masonic "profession."

Next the word "in" alludes to being surrounded by or a part of and not separate. Men who are Freemasons, their lodges and temples have always been very visible in towns and cities. Freemasons have also always participated in their communities in many ways, not just while they are servicing their community but as members of other volunteer associations. Through "in" we hoped to help dispel the notion of Freemasonry being a "secret society."

The words "American Community" were chosen to place the exhibit in our country. Freemasonry exists in over 100 countries and takes on different forms and different purposes according to the culture in which it grows. American Freemasons are very different from Brazilian or French or Japanese Freemasons.

Lastly "Community" encompasses a great diversity of definitions. From the community within a Masonic lodge, to the community of fifty states of America, across all time spans and human characteristics, there is a community when two or three are gathered. "Community" is synonymous with "fraternity" and "brotherhood" and is comparable to the union of states to create our nation, a community of local lodges that create a Grand Lodge; "E Pluribus Unum"—"out of many one."

## CONCLUSIONS

After nearly two and a half years of research, writing, organizing and planning, the exhibition at last opened on June 1, 2002. After the process I am still wondering what the purpose is for collecting and displaying Masonic historical artifacts. Is it to impress, inform or entertain? While Masonic exhibitions can certainly try to be all things to all people, there will always be restrictions.

First, due to the Craft's esoteric nature, all exhibitions will have to start with a basic explanation of its origins, purposes and organization. This is compounded by endless differences in Masonic rituals, jurisdictions, rites, auxiliaries, governance and charities that perplex even 50-year brothers. Freemasonry ever again became as familiar as the telephone or department stores or even the PTA or popular as it was in 1800 or 1900, then more complex and innovative exhibitions could be attempted.

Unfortunately, most Masonic displays still assume the Craft is widely popular and familiar. They usually concentrate on displaying long gone famous masons, trying to resolve anti-mason's misconceptions, or trumpeting their wonderful charitable activities. What the fraternity must come to grips with is that most of the members of its "hall of fame" neither interest today's public nor are among the truly great men of Freemasonry, such as Rob Morris, Albert Mackey or Frank S. Land. Furthermore, they need to shed their persecution complex and paranoia while realizing every American fraternity has wonderful charity programs. Lastly, the majority of Americans have neither a positive nor a negative perception of Freemasonry. At best, they are vaguely aware of Freemasons and typecast them as humorous, spooky, and weird just as they view ghosts, "Area 51" aliens, or obsessive fans of cult movies.

This current climate of ignorance is both a curse and blessing. The fraternity is adrift trying to determine a new mission and explanation of itself as the majority of Anti-masons are now worrying about bigger "international threats" and the last truly famous Mason, Gerald Ford, left the White House in 1977. On the other hand, the Craft now has an opportunity to present the fraternity in the way and manner of its choosing. Freemasonry can begin working more closely with non-Masonic scholars and history museums to facilitate a broader and richer understanding of its long and complex history. This goal must start, however, with Grand Lodges and other governing Masonic bodies providing the resources and professional staff to better organize, care for, and promote their collections. A great start would be simply inviting local professors and museum curators to a special tour of the collections. These activities must also follow up with long-term commitments to financially support all researchers and public museums interested in pursuing topics related to the Craft.

It is my firm belief that if Freemasonry ever hopes to receive its due consideration and a fair public understanding, it will not come through "official histories" or "institutional promotional press kits," but only when highly respected non-masons produce thorough and fair assessments, in whatever media, of Freemasonry. Certainly the recent publication of Jasper Ridley's "The Freemasons" or Steven Bullock's 1996 book "Revolutionary Brotherhood" are great strides in the right direction.

Freemasonry can decide not to present public exhibitions that explain or promote itself at all. While this is a radical suggestion and contradicts much of what I have argued in this paper, the choice merits consideration. One of my persistent concerns during the exhibition process was whether Freemasonry was simply too abstract and complex a concept for public consumption. By this I am not inferring that Americans are not sufficiently intelligent to comprehend Freemasonry, rather something deeper. Perhaps we need to study the obligations, lectures, and traditions that encouraged Freemasonry to

remain aloof from the fickle and rough and tumble ways of the public. If the Craft expects men to "seek, ask and knock," then let the public do likewise if they are interested in its history. There is a far greater urgency to educate and encourage participation among men already initiated, than among the uninitiated public. It is easy enough to let stand the massed displays of aprons and past masters jewels or thousands of Masonic books and archives sitting on dusty shelves. They do no harm and a little good as lodge decorations and trophies of past glories.

But as a historian first and a mason second, I fundamentally believe Freemasonry, with all its aprons, jewels, badges, and certificates, has rich stories to tell. They must be told because they reveal the fundamental dynamic of American society and history: how do men who live in private and restrictive communities seek to "unite men of every country, sect and opinion, and conciliate true friendship." Telling these stories remains a challenge worthy of historians and Freemasons who are both dedicated to seeking truth.