

PRESERVING THE ROYAL ARCH

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"...pure Antient Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, viz. those of the Entered Apprentice, the Fellow Craft, and the Master Mason including the Supreme Order of the Holy Royal Arch."¹

The Chapter degrees are beautiful ceremonies which are complimentary to those of the Blue Lodge. In many ways, the Royal Arch degrees either complete or otherwise provide further elucidation on themes and narratives we find in the three Craft degrees. These are important rituals that absolutely must be preserved, as it would be unfortunate to see them become either forgotten curios collected by the Allied Masonic Degrees, or to disappear completely. Bearing this entirely possible fate in mind, we must be cognizant of the fact that attendance and retention in the York Rite, in general, are both sinking lower and lower each year.² This decline is essentially commensurate with the numbers of the Blue Lodge and, in some cases, even more bleak.³

When we consider what can be done about the predicament in which we find ourselves, we usually plan community events for visibility, reluctantly utilize social media, or we offer a free introductory Mark Master degree in order to inspire an interest in further pursuing the Chapter degrees. In short, we try to make it easier and offer a lower commitment – and, at times, we literally give it away. But, if we look at the data and ask ourselves honestly, we find that these things are not working. Similar tactics have been employed in the Blue Lodge, such as the abolishment of the *2BIASKI* rule, acceptance of short form proficiency and one-day classes during which the candidate receives all three Craft degrees with all the proficiency and memory work on credit. The Shrine has also lifted their long-standing requirement that the candidate be either a 32° A.A.S.R. or a Knight Templar Mason, but these initiatives do not appear to be working there either.

The solution many Blue Lodges are finding is in increasing the value of the Masonic experience. This entails instituting better education programs and presentations (often with notable, published out-of-town lecturers), better meals (sometimes called Festive or Harmony Boards), the requirement of tuxedos and gloves for officers, pursuing excellence in ritual performance, and raising the dues in correspondence with the costs incurred from elevating the experience in the Blue Lodge. These Lodges usually also lengthen the amount of time between degrees by having the Brother perform long form proficiency, writing a paper on their experience and understanding of the degree, and by assigning certain required reading. When a candidate or Brother have felt that they have made an investment in the Craft, they are less likely to lose interest. Conversely, they are more likely to be actively involved and pass on this ethos to the candidates and Brothers entering the West Gate after them. As a result of these adjustments, many of the Lodges that have taken on this commitment to excellence have done extremely well in these otherwise trying times in Freemasonry.

We are all aware that, in the U.K., they have preserved the Royal Arch in the Blue Lodge. This seems to make sense since the Chapter degrees are contextually entangled with the Craft degrees. The Mark Master Mason degree, for example, is a seamless extension to the Fellowcraft degree – it does much to further illuminate the structure and symbolism of that degree. The Mark Master is, in fact, still conferred in a Fellowcraft Lodge in some jurisdictions (as is the case in Scotland). The (Virtual) Past Master degree is largely perfunctory because, in the U.S., it is required that those admitted to Royal Arch Masonry must be Past Masters of a Blue Lodge. Due to the popularity that the Chapter degrees once enjoyed, the Past Master degree was conferred as a way around this stipulation for those who had not sat as Worshipful Master. Both the Most Excellent Master and Royal Arch Mason degrees expand upon and somewhat complete the narrative begun in the Master Mason degree. If these degrees were reabsorbed by the Blue Lodge, the Grand Chapter, if still necessary, could either be considered a special committee or a subgroup at the Grand Lodge level.

These degrees and bodies, which certainly provide Further Light in Masonry, could be fitted back into the Blue Lodge fairly easily, either as optional appendant degrees or as formal requirements for other Masonic milestones. Perhaps the Master of the Blue Lodge will have had to obtain the Royal Arch degree or, conversely, one would only be eligible for the Royal Arch if one has sat as Worshipful Master of a Blue Lodge, as there is evidence to support that this was indeed the case. Yes, this reabsorption would require more work of the Blue Lodge officers – ritual memorization, extra practices, a store of paraphernalia, etc. – but it would also add more depth and value to the greater Masonic experience. In fact, in some sense it would be restorative of a previous state of the Craft – a state which viewed membership in the Fraternity as an exclusive honor, not-so-easily obtained, and, consequently, extremely valued by those who had achieved its lofty heights.

If the current decline in membership means that the Fraternity and its appendant bodies must downsize, consolidate and/or merge its Lodges – as is obviously underway, whether we like it or not – then so mote it be. If this means that the Royal Arch Chapter must consider reabsorption into the Blue Lodge, lest it face the fate of so many other degree systems that are no longer practiced, then perhaps it is time for us to broach the subject with our respective Grand Lodges. If this means that there is a smaller, tighter core of true and faithful custodians of the Craft and the Chapter, whose primary interest is in preserving the integrity of Freemasonry's legacies, then we need to embrace the ideas of those who would pass on an intact and pristine edifice. The degrees of Freemasonry and those of the Royal Arch will move inexorably onward if we are willing to make honest assessments and act in accordance with preserving the value of the Fraternity as a whole. Consolidating the Chapter and the Craft degrees may be a way to move forward without suffering the loss of one or both.

Endnotes:

1. Denslow and Turnbull, *History of Royal Arch Masonry Part One*, Kessinger, pp. 199-200
2. <http://www.coyorkrite.org/KTPROCEEDINGS.pdf>, <https://orlandoyorkrite.org/posts/2017/03/>, <http://www.scgyr.org/proceedings/2017SC.pdf>, *ad nauseum...*
3. <http://www.msana.com/msastats.asp>, retrieved online