

Victoria Lodge of Education and Research

650 Fisgard St, Victoria, B.C. Canada

One Step Forward

Presented to the Victoria Lodge of Education and Research on September 20, 2005
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PART ONE – INTRODUCTION

The number four will have a special significance this evening.

We four have come here to talk to you about Royal Arch Masonry and we thank you for the opportunity to do so.

In many Masonic jurisdictions the Royal Arch Degree is the fourth degree, immediately aft the three Craft degrees and for good reason, which we will explain. And while four is just one more than three and the Royal Arch Chapter is jut one step beyond the lodge, in this jurisdiction we offer *two bonus degrees*.

We will cover three aspects of the Royal Arch story and each of us will speak for only four minutes.

Our aim is to encourage each and every Master Mason to take one step forward towards more light in Freemasonry.

In the average North American lodge, forty per cent of the membership already has taken a step forward; roughly twenty per cent into a Royal Arch Chapter and about the same into a Scottish Rite Lodge of Perfection. It might surprise some of the other sixty per cent to hear that we would be just as delighted if you advanced into a Lodge of Perfection as we would be if you advanced into a Royal Arch chapter. But those who have experienced both won't be surprised. They know how much more Masonic light there is available in either direction. However, there are many differences between the two and it is a fact that around the world there are many more Royal Arch chapters than there are Lodges of Perfection.

Our second speaker will tell you more about the history of the Royal Arch. Our third will summarize the essential content of the Royal Arch degree and our fourth will tell you more about the two bonus degrees.

As a team, our purpose is to encourage more of you to gain the advantage we enjoy — the additional light, the additional opportunities, the rewards — and although we are dressed this evening in the regalia of Royal Arch Masons, we are, first and always, Craft lodge Masons, for it is also a fact and one worth careful thought that those who do advance beyond the lodge invariably become more faithful lodge members as well.

We are here as lodge members who love the craft rite but have also discovered more light, gained more opportunities, realized more rewards and want to share our pleasure with more of our brethren.

But not every Master Mason should take that additional step forward as quickly as possible. The lesson of the cable tow is taught in the very first degree of Freemasonry. Some have longer cable tows than others — more time and energy to spare. But just as membership in the craft lodge can involve as little as one evening a month, membership in a Royal Arch chapter entails nothing compulsory. In fact, with the chapter degrees, you don't have to memorize any catechisms or questions and answers; memory work is not compulsory, nor is degree work, nor is taking an office. These are additional opportunities, offering greater rewards, just as in lodge.

Given those facts, simple membership in a Royal Arch chapter really can't impose any great strain on anyone's cable tow, even if he is already committed to advancing through the chairs in his lodge.

True, there is another level of dues (in most cases lower than your lodge dues, depending upon the location of the chapter) and there are one-time degree fees. But if you become as enthusiastic as we, and want to confer degrees on others, that will be your choice. Or enter the progression of offices (a chapter has nine), that will be your choice. Or serve on committees of the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of British Columbia and Yukon — your choice. Or accept appointment to Grand Chapter offices, or stand for election to the highest ones — your choice. You assess your cable tow. You can take advantage of whichever additional opportunities appeal to you. You reap the rewards when ready and able.

It is as true in chapter as in lodge that simply exposing yourself to additional degrees won't gain as much for you as the involvement in the chapter's life and work, for the process works its full magic over time. But it is also true (and we four vouch for this) that Royal Arch Masonry can work powerful magic given the chance, and like craft lodge Masonry it has done so for centuries`

PART TWO – HISTORY OF THE HOLY ROYAL ARCH

Nobody knows exactly how old the Holy Royal Arch is. We know that some of the material in the modern degrees was separated out from some versions of the Master Mason degree, that the Master Mason degree itself evolved from legends documented centuries earlier and that all of it existed first under a shroud of secrecy.

The *York fabric rolls* produced in the 1400s say something about a second part of the third degree, and other records in England show reference in the mid-1500's to the term "*Holy Royal Arch.*" So something existed long before the earliest written ritual we can find today.

It is generally accepted that the modern form of the Royal Arch degree was penned in the 1730s during the period when all the degrees as we know them were being revised and taking different forms in England, Ireland, and France. Some say that those who formed the so-called Antient Grand Lodge created the modern Royal Arch degree, but we know it was practiced in Dublin and London before the Grand Lodge came into being. However, it was the Antients who always insisted that the Royal Arch was "an integral and crowning part of the craft ceremonial," worked as a "fourth degree."

There is a 1744 record of an assembly of Royal Arch Masons in New York, and we know that the degree had crossed the Atlantic and became a full-fledged part of North America's York

Rite by 1745. Around the same time in Ireland, it appears that a degree called “Master of the Royal Arch” was an honour conferred upon Installed Masters described as “an organized body of men who have passed the chair,” and other early records show that only Past Masters were eligible to receive the Royal Arch Degree. Later it was opened to Master Masons deemed worthy to be called “Virtual Past Masters.” You will hear about this degree in Part Four of this presentation.

One important aspect of all these old records is that the Royal Arch degree, in whatever form it took, and wherever, was than always conferred under the authority of Craft Lodge warrants; it was part of the lodge degree system.

We also hear of chapters being formed to confer “the Most Sublime” or “Holy Royal Arch Degree” in the same place as the lodges by members of those lodges. Apparently the lodges simply closed and reopened as chapters.

By 1766 some members of the so called Modern Grand Lodge (the one formed in 17170 had separated their Royal Arch activities from the Grand Lodge’s authority by forming a separate Grand and Royal Arch chapter. After the 1813 union of the Antients and the Moderns, all chapters in England came under the control of the new “Supreme Grand Chapter.”

The year 1813 also marks the most significant modern statement about links between the Master Mason and the Royal Arch degrees. In that year the United Grand Lodge of England, the mother of regular and legitimate Freemasonry in the modern world, said these critically important words:

Pure and ancient craft Masonry consists of three degrees and no more, namely , those of Entered Apprentice, Fellow Craft and Master Mason including the Holy Royal Arch.”

Note: *Master Mason including the Holy Royal Arch.*

It has always been said that "the Master Mason degree without the Royal Arch is a story half told a song half sung and a promise unfulfilled. The two go hand in hand, or should. They are two halves of the same story.

In some rituals the new Master Mason is told he has received “all the light in Masonry the lodge has to offer.” Many Masons therefore infer that the third degree is the final part of the essential content of Ancient craft Masonry. Not so. We receive in lodge all the light the lodge is authorized to transmit, but not all the light contained in the material of Ancient craft Masonry, for some of that was withdrawn and made separate during the period of ritual revision in the 1700s, and ever since Royal Arch Masonry’s greatest challenge has been to overcome the loss of knowledge among Master Masons about that two part relationship between the Master Mason and Royal Arch degrees, which is why we are here today.

PART THREE – ESSENTIAL CONTENT OF THE ROAYL ARCH DEGREE

It can be a disappointment to discover that certain secrets are withheld during the Master Mason degree and only a substitute word is given then. The truth is, the Master Mason degree raises more questions than it answers. It can and perhaps should seem incomplete. To some, it promises more than it delivers.

Some who never advanced beyond the third degree say that the whole point of the degree is the lesson that ultimate secrets are to be obtained only after we pass the *final veil* — that our temple is not complete until then and we can't become perfect Master Masons until the Great Architect summons us into His eternal presence.

If you are happy with such answers, great! You are a good man seeking to make himself better and previous generations have shown that the craft lodge can provide ample opportunities to learn how and to put what you learn into practice for the good of all.

Without advancing beyond the lodge you can develop your mind with techniques such as memorization — learn tolerance and teamwork and interdependency — develop planning and leadership capabilities — contemplate lessons of morality and ethics, benevolence and charity, duty and gratitude — read and research and write and give talks — and build a beautiful spiritual temple to hopefully stand the test of the Great Architect's square.

The Royal Arch experience will not necessarily make you an even better man and Saint Peter will not turn away one who says he reached only as far as the third degree. But the Royal Arch does contain answers to some of the questions raised in the third degree. According to the historians, it contains the answers originally in that third degree — answers intended for everyone who seeks them.

Like it nor not, modern Freemasonry is more than three degrees. It is perhaps unfortunate that some say there is no higher degree than that of Master Mason. No more honourable one, okay, no argument. But no matter what form Freemasonry took originally, the form that evolved during the eighteenth century was not confined to three degrees. The material in the most sublime degree of the Holy Royal Arch and later in the Scottish Rite equivalent has for centuries been separate only as an inducement to *keep searching*. The Master Mason receives only the substitute word because what is ultimately intended for him is given under the Royal Arch. Every Master Mason should know this.

Royal Arch Masonry is the practice and pleasure of sharing the additional light that completes and makes the whole picture — the full message. But it does not answer every very possible question. Its purpose is to further encourage the Freemason's search for the ultimate Truth by a process which demonstrates that his own additional efforts will bring even greater rewards.

The oldest ritual contains an exchange like this'

Whence come you?

From the East.

Whither going?

To the West.

For what purpose?

To seek for that which was lost but is now found.

What is that which was lost and is now found?

The Master Mason's word.

Lost but now found! The third degree says the word was lost through the death of Hiram Abif. The Royal Arch degrees are about how the word was rediscovered. Loss and rediscovery. Two parts of one story. Both parts intended for every good man.

The third degree provides a substitute word to serve “*until the wisdom of future generations shall discover the true word*” ... and bring it to light. The Royal Arch degree is the dramatic story of further searching; of further discoveries; of the recovery of the lost word.

The Royal Arch perfects the third degree. They are the first and second volumes of a continuous history. In the third degree we experience loss; the loss of a great man, an exemplar of virtue and honour; the loss of the ability to communicate the word — profound lessons about loss. In the Royal Arch degree we experience recovery. But what is recovered is more than we had thought. More because we hadn't known what it was. We received a substitute we thought was a profound secret but is nothing compared to what is recovered.

The great Masonic allegory does not end with the death of Hiram Abif. It is in fact the story of the search for the word. A story that must be experienced to be understood in full.

PART FOUR – BONUS DEGREES IN THE ROYAL ARCH CHAPTER

The Grand Lodges on the continent of Europe, in the United States, in Ireland and perhaps Scotland, pronounce the Royal Arch to be the seventh step or grade. So said the Reverend George Oliver, the most prolific Masonic writer of nineteenth century England. Apparently he wasn't sure about Scotland. But the point he wanted to make was that the Royal Arch was still available as the fourth degree in England, whereas in numerous other jurisdictions three others had been inserted.

In this jurisdiction two bonus degrees are:

Mark Master Mason

Most Excellent Master

There is a fourth bonus degree which is the Virtual Past Master degree conferred by chapters of the Grand Chapter of Nova Scotia and the Grand Royal Arch jurisdictions in the United States, and by one chapter in this jurisdiction — Columbia Chapter No. 1 in Victoria, British Columbia.

This Virtual Past Master degree was created centuries ago to provide Royal Arch eligibility to Master Masons who had not yet served as master of their lodge. This degree teaches lessons that some actual lodge masters say they came to understand only thirteen months after they took their seat in the East! — and wish they had been taught as clearly before their first month there. And when they receive it in a Royal Arch chapter, they tell us we do a much better job than the Board of Installed Masters! It is noted that before a companion can enter a chapter of Royal Arch Masons in Nova Scotia or the United States he must possess the Virtual Past Master degree.

The Mark Master Mason degree is an extension of the Fellow Craft degree. Its content dates back to operative Masonry in the 16th century in Scotland and England. It appears to have grown out of an ancient ceremony in which each craftsman selected a private mark with which to designate his work, and this mark was properly registered. Masonic lodges had incorporated the mark into their ceremonies by the 1600s, if not earlier, as shown by lodge records of 1670 in Aberdeen and 1678 in Kilwinning.

In an old Scottish Masonic lecture is the question, “Where got you that mark?” and the answer given, “I laid down one and took this one up,” meaning he had met the qualifications and received his mark.

The Mark Master Mason degree is a wonderfully dramatic story about the keystone, which was wrought by Hiram Abif and needed for the completion of Solomon’s temple; about how every craftsman needed his own mark in order to prove his worth and receive his wages; and about how each of us can obtain a mark that will further establish us as members of a fraternity that recognizes our true worth.

The Most Excellent Master Degree is a favourite of many. It dramatizes the story of the completion and dedication of Solomon’s temple in which Solomon at first speaks proudly, then in total darkness offers a prayer of modesty and humility which is answered by the blessing of the Lord in the form of fire descending from Heaven. In gratitude and celebration, Solomon acknowledges the craftsmen as Most Excellent Masters and charges them to share their Masonic light and knowledge with others — a charge we four are here today to honour as our predecessors have done for centuries.

But these bonus degrees are indeed merely preparation for the most sublime degree of the Holy Royal Arch, the capstone of ancient craft Masonry, containing the keys to its greatest allegory and most profound symbolism, and much more of what each of us joined the fraternity in search of:

Knowledge.

Enlightenment.

The mystic ties that bind good men together.

The keys to help us find answers to the most profound questions in life.

Take one step forward into a Royal Arch chapter and this much we can guarantee from our own experience: the extent to which Freemasonry can help you in your personal quest will indeed be greatly increased.

Royal Arch Masonry helps expand our horizons and efforts beyond the goal of self-improvement. We are taught in lodge, beyond fraternal benevolence, to an understanding of the interdependence of all humankind with each other, with nature and with nature’s God.

If that is what you are looking for come join us

In any case, thank you for listening to us.