

A Brief History of the Cryptic Degrees in the State of North Carolina

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The history of the Cryptic Rite, particularly in North Carolina, has been one of tumult and disarray. This paper is intended to briefly take us through the history of this Rite with particular attention to its relationship to the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction (AASR, SJ) and the Grand Chapter of North Carolina. We will even see the interesting history of our own Council here in Greensboro.

The Royal and Select Masters degrees were most likely first introduced into America in 1766 at Albany, NY. Although the earliest documented conferral of a degree with similarity to our current Select Masters degree was the “Select Mason of 27” which was conferred by Moses Cohan, Grand Inspector General of the Rite of Perfection, the predecessor of the AASR, for Kingston, Jamaica to Abraham Jacobs on Nov. 9, 1790.

From its earliest history, the Cryptic degrees have been frequently claimed by the AASR as honorary or side degrees. In 1802, the Supreme Council of the AASR, in Charleston, SC, published a manifesto claiming the creation of this new Rite. This document listed the schedule of the Scottish Rite degrees as well as the fact that there were “other degrees in the possession of individual Inspectors, not in the rite, but isolated – as, Select Master, or the Elect of 27, Royal Arch of Dublin, etc. which are communicated generally free of expense to those brethren who are high enough to understand them.” Furthermore, in 1827 Moses Holbrook, at the time a high officer in the AASR, SJ, claimed that the Royal and Select Master degrees were brought from Berlin, Prussia by Joseph Myers to America in 1778 and that documentary evidence of this claim could be found in the archives of the Council of the Princes of Jerusalem at Charleston.

The Cryptic Rite of Masonry as a separate system is known to have started in 1818, mainly due to the work done by Jeremy L. Cross who received the Select Master degree from Philip P. Eckle in Baltimore in 1817. It is assumed that he received the Royal Master degree sometime early in 1818. Most experts agree that Cross probably united the two degrees into one system sometime between May and August of 1818. Shortly thereafter, in 1820, the first Grand Council was formed in Connecticut. Two years after that, the premier Grand Council of NC was founded on June 24, 1822 in Fayetteville by James Cushman who personally received the degrees from Jeremy Cross. Unfortunately, none of the subordinate Councils from that period have survived.

The earliest records of the Cryptic degrees in Greensboro can be found in connection with the formation of Chorazin Chapter No. 13 in 1828. There is documentation showing that William Kerr, the first Grand King of Chorazin Chapter received the Cryptic degrees in Greensboro in October of that year. There is no evidence that anyone else in the area received the degrees and in 1836 or 1837 Comp. Kerr moved to Mississippi and, for a time, Cryptic Masonry was no longer in Greensboro. It seems reasonable that the Cryptic Degrees were primarily under the control of subordinate Chapters in the early 1800s in North Carolina, although there seemed to be no formal authority over these degrees until 1847 when the General Grand Chapter authorized subordinate Chapters to confer the Cryptic degrees in states where no Councils existed. In 1849, the Grand Chapter of NC took control of the Cryptic degrees one step

further by questioning not only who had authority over the degrees but also the position of the degrees in relation to the Capitular degrees. In a report made at the annual Convocation the questions were asked, “Whether they attach to a Chapter, or are subject to a Grand Council – and whether they should not be conferred before the Royal Arch?” We believe it has been the practice in this State to confer those Degrees after the Royal Arch, and in the absence of a Grand Council, by regular Chapters. Your committee are free to acknowledge that the Degrees above stated, their humble judgment, appear to be the peculiar and almost necessary property of the Chapters (and **should in all cases be conferred prior to the Royal Arch**). In this arrangement they present ‘a most expressive and beautiful chain of traditionary history,’ which is rendered disjointed and incomplete by any other position. Even the Royal Arch Degree, the summit of Masonry, is unsatisfactory and imperfect without the explanation afforded by them.”

The Cryptic degrees seemed to be under the control of the subordinate Chapters in North Carolina, mainly as a result of the work done by Levi L. Stevenson, Grand Lecturer of the Grand Chapter of NC, who was known to have conferred the Cryptic degrees on several occasions throughout the state. At the same time the AASR, SJ at the insistence of Bro. A.G. Mackey claimed to formally assume jurisdiction over the Royal and Select Masters degrees “by granting charters of constitution” to newly formed Councils. In fact, at least four Councils in NC, including Greensboro Council No. 3, were chartered by the AASR, SJ. The first of which was Alpha Council No. 1, in Wadesboro in 1850. Unfortunately, this Council did not survive past 1873.

This was indeed a tumultuous time for the Cryptic degrees in our state. On June 3, 1850 a special committee of the Grand Chapter of NC reported on the control of the degrees. They said, in part, “To our minds the strongest claim of the Chapters may be founded on the fact of these not being regular degrees of the Supreme Council 33d Degree, and being only honorary, or side degrees, such as no regularly organized body generally pretends to set up any exclusive claim for; all are privileged to use.” – They also reported on the order of the degrees, “...as the General Grand Chapter has placed these degrees above the Arch...we cannot, therefore, indulge any preference at variance with that practice.” However, in 1853 the General Grand Chapter, who had claimed jurisdiction over the degrees just six years earlier, reversed its position and gave up its claim on the conferral of the Royal and Select Masters degrees; although some Grand Chapters continued to maintain control over the degrees such as the Grand Chapter of Maryland which kept them until 1872, and the Grand Chapter of Virginia, which still controls them. Following the lead of the General Grand Chapter, the Grand High Priest of NC reported that since the General Grand Chapter no longer made any claims over the Royal and Select Masters degrees then they could not be considered the property of the subordinate Chapters in North Carolina. The Grand Chapter of NC officially adopted the report of the Grand High Priest during its annual meeting in 1855; thereby setting these degrees in a state of flux in North Carolina during this time.

After three years of floating without any designated controlling body, the question of the Cryptic degrees was once again brought up in the Grand Chapter of NC. On June 8, 1858 a resolution was presented stating, “Resolved, That in the opinion of this Grand Chapter, the degrees of Royal and Select Masters, are a part and parcel of Royal Arch Masonry, and that Subordinate Chapters, under our jurisdiction, are hereby authorized to confer them.” The following day a resolution was adopted to form a committee of three to investigate the previous resolution and give a formal report at the next Annual Convocation of the Grand Chapter. This

committee made its report to the Grand Chapter on June 7, 1859 with the following resolution, “Resolved, That this Grand Chapter, after due consideration, hereby disclaims for itself and subordinates any and all control over the Royal and Select Masters’ Degrees.” This resolution was passed the following day. However, this would not be the last time the two organizations merged in our state. It is also interesting to note that Bro. A.G. Mackey was among the visitors during this Annual Convocation, he was at this time, the Grand High Priest of South Carolina, as well as the Secretary General for the AASR, SJ. As has been seen earlier in this paper, Bro. Mackey was of the opinion that the Cryptic Degrees should be claimed as the providence of the AASR, SJ. In fact, that same year the Supreme Council passed several statutes regarding the Cryptic degrees:

- Article XXXII – Stated that the Supreme Council has jurisdiction over the Royal and Select Masters degrees where no Grand Council exists;
- Article XXXIII – Stated that every Sovereign Grand Inspector General is automatically a member of any Grand Council of state if he has received the Cryptic Degrees; and
- Article XLII – Stated that Councils of Royal and Select Masters under the jurisdiction of the Supreme Council must meet at least once every 3 months.

Under the auspices of the above-mentioned statutes, on May 9, 1860 the Supreme Council organized three additional Councils in North Carolina including Adoniram Council No. 2 in Salisbury and Greensboro Council No. 3. Both of these Councils have their original charters, which were signed by A.G. Mackey and Albert Pike and stamped with the Seal of the Supreme Council of the Southern Jurisdiction. One month later, on June 6, 1860, with the administrative help and backing of Bro. Mackey, three Councils formed the current Grand Council of North Carolina in Wilmington (we may presume that Greensboro Council No. 3 was one of the founding Councils). Unfortunately, as a result of the Civil War, the Grand Council did not officially meet again until 1866.

As early as 1861 Albert Pike was aware that the Cryptic Degrees had no rightful place being under the control of the Supreme Council and in his *Allocution* urged the AASR, SJ to “as soon as possible rid” itself of the Royal and Select Masters degrees. Finally in 1868 Article XXI was passed stating that the Supreme Council relinquished control over the Royal and Select Masters degrees; although, full control was not rested from the Supreme Council until 1870.

In 1880 several Grand Councils were strong enough to finally take up the task of forming a General Grand Council, NC was not part of the General Grand Council at this time because it was not considered strong enough to survive on its own. The General Grand Council officially came into existence in March, 1881. Immediately following the formation of the General Grand Council the General Grand Chapter reported, “That the General Grand Chapter has no jurisdiction over the degrees of Royal and Select Master, and that it is inexpedient for the General Grand Chapter to take any action concerning them.” However, as a result of the weakness inherent in many states’ Grand Councils some Grand Chapters continued to control their corresponding Grand Councils. This exact scenario began to take shape in 1883 in North Carolina, where, on May 15, at the annual Convocation of the Grand Council of NC a resolution was passed to merge with the Grand Chapter of NC. Although it was not until 1886 when the two Grand Bodies in NC appointed a joint committee to review the actual merger of the two organizations. The committee was unable to agree on the merger. At this time the Grand Council feared going defunct as seen from the following statement: “...but this much we cannot

help expressing that it was a mistake that the General Grand Chapter at its last Convocation did not assume the jurisdiction of the Royal and Select Degrees. In some of the States it will be impossible to maintain a separate organization. We chance to be Most Illustrious Grand Master of Royal and Select Masters in this State, and we reluctantly make this confession, that the Grand Council of North Carolina will soon be a thing of the past.” The following year the Grand High Priest of NC stated his belief that the Royal and Select Masters degrees should be part of the Chapter again.

“If it is essential, or if my individual opinion is worth anything, I will say that I believe the Royal and Select Masters Degrees belong in the Chapter, and that they have no legitimate place outside of it. If not confined in the Chapter, the neophyte finds a hiatus, well known to and recognized by every well skilled Royal Arch Mason. That hiatus can never be explained except by the conferring of the Cryptic Degrees. The candidate is informed in the Royal Arch Degree that links in the chain are lost which can not be repaired ‘until the wisdom of future generations shall reveal the true ones.’” – he continued by saying, “Our Grand Chapter acted with wisdom when it took them under its protection and control.”

However, later that same year, the subordinate Councils of NC once again found internal support and were able to reorganize into the Grand Council that we know today. Shortly following this reorganization a resolution to separate the Grand Chapter and the Grand Council of NC was put forth.

“RESOLVED, that the action of the Grand Chapter of North Carolina, at its Annual Convocation of the year 1883 consolidating the Capitular and Cryptic degrees and merging the two systems is hereby repealed, subject to the action of the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of North Carolina, and that the last presiding officer of that Grand Body be requested to convene said Body as soon as possible, for the purpose of reorganization and taking control of the Royal and Select Masters Degrees as formerly.” The resolution was adopted by a vote of 24 to 5.

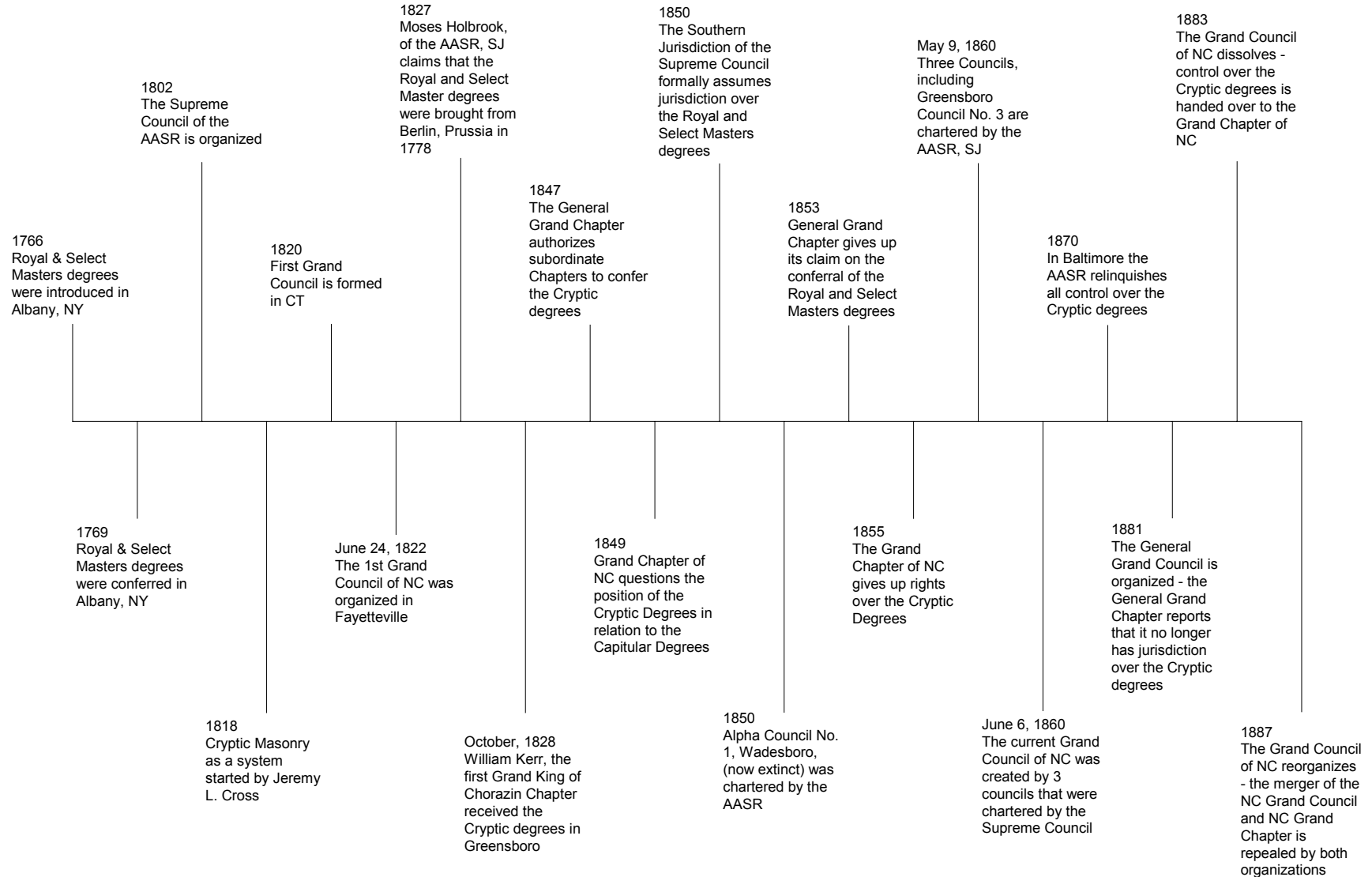
At this time Comp. J.I. Macks, who was the Most Illustrious Grand Master of the Grand Council of NC presided as the following resolutions were approved:

“RESOLVED, That the action of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of North Carolina ... relegating the Cryptic degrees ... to the Grand Council of the same, subject to the action of the said Grand Council, be and the same is hereby approved and ratified, and that this Grand Council do hereby resume control of said degrees” and

“RESOLVED, That the action of the Grand Chapter of North Carolina, at its annual Convocation of the year 1883, consolidating the Capitular and Cryptic Degrees and merging the two systems, is hereby repealed...”

Thus, in 1887, the Grand Council of NC finally proved strong enough to stand on its own and has, to this day, maintained control and authority over the Cryptic Degrees in our state.

Timeline of the Cryptic Degrees with Specific Focus on North Carolina



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