

The Royal Arch: Summit of Craft Masonry

The goal of the Capitular Degrees is the advancement of knowledge and the dissemination of truth. But, the degrees of Royal Arch Masonry are much more than a progressive discovery of our own ignorance. The degrees are a ceremonial ritual to which Companions may become attached through education and labor and feel content as an important part of an infinite existence. The lectures and symbols are designed to move a Companion closer to an understanding of the absolute that he may hold up as a torch to light his way.

In this way, the Royal Arch Degree is often considered the summit of Craft Masonry, the *sine qua non* of the York Rite system; and by many regarded as the most beautiful degree in Freemasonry. Simply stated, a brother Mason cannot attain his full Masonic height until he is conferred a Companion Royal Arch Mason. However, the Royal Arch Degree is filled with a depth of history and symbolism unrivaled in the Craft, which for many may be unfamiliar and difficult to easily understand. No Brother who is unwilling to search deeply for its great truths, both for his own good and that he may bring its indispensable lessons to all worthy Master Masons, should be accepted into Royal Arch Masonry.

Degrees of Royal Arch Masonry

The degrees of Royal Arch Masonry present comprehensive instruction of Masonic knowledge that range from simple, plain statements of Truth that are easily understandable and helpful in relation to life, to profound mysteries that stretch back through the ages that connect man to nature and the divine. For these reasons, Capitular Masonry reaches across the world to every culture where other Royal Arch Masons are eager to receive one another in full fellowship and the spirit of discovery.

The Capitular Ritual and ceremonial guidebooks of the Grand Chapter detail important instructions to arrange the furniture of the Temple, identify the tools and equipment required, and explain any advance preparations necessary to properly confer a Capitular Degree. But the degrees can accomplish so much more than a process to elevate a Candidate from one level of "knowledge" to the next. They are also a performing art! Stage presence, music, lighting and wardrobe all contribute a significant level of appreciation, along with an improved understanding for many of the subtle clues, to the concept of Capitular "EXALTATION"!

Mark Master Degree:

The Mark Master Degree is believed to have originated as a ceremony of registering an individual mark which distinguished the accomplished skill of a master craftsman from that on operative apprentice. Some scholars suggest it may be one of the earliest forms of an operative ritual, which has since developed into the rite of Masonic degrees.

In the York Rite (though it wasn't always this way), the Mark Master is the first of the Capitular degrees. The candidate for the Mark Master Degree represents a humble laborer in the quarries of King Solomon's Temple, who is instructed to present his work in payment of a craftsman's wage. The work presented is first determined of little value and discarded as unfit, but later discovered crucial to the building yet not made by his hand.

The Mark Master Degree expands on the lessons of charity first introduced in the Entered Apprentice Degree, and historically serves as a continuation of the Second (Fellowcraft) degree wherein the Candidate is taught what a workman's wages are and how to receive them. It teaches that a man can be often misunderstood and under-valued, but always to remain true to his heart and be ever willing to stand up for what he knows to be right, even if that position is unpopular; discharge his several duties punctually and with precision; but never claim the work of another as his own.

Past Master Degree:

Essentially, the Past Master Degree was the first of the Capitular Degrees and dates back to 1768 in England. It was originally designed to be conferred in a Symbolic Lodge on an actual Past Master to qualify the candidate for admission to the Holy Royal Arch. However, the restriction proved difficult to maintain, and because the degrees from Entered Apprentice to Royal Arch were conferred in the Craft Lodges, it prevented many worthy Brethren from receiving the light of all the degrees of Freemasonry.

In America, this requirement was modified in 1854 which integrated the Past Master Degree into Capitular Masonry and placed the order of conferral to follow the Mark Master Degree. The "virtual" concept was also instituted to comply with ancient Masonic landmarks, yet make it possible for all worthy Brethren to receive the Royal Arch Degree. Conferral of the Past Master Degree does not bestow any actual recognized rights, privileges or status. A Brother must serve in fact as Master of a Lodge to claim the designation of Past Master.

The Capitular Degree of (virtual) Past Master thus teaches three important lessons in the Masonic tradition. First, a man must learn how to obey before he can expect to rule. Second, a man must learn to wisely govern himself before he can learn to effectively govern others. Finally, a Chapter is most successful when leadership is officiated with moderation and decorum.

Disorder and Restraint

The format of the Past Master Degree is designed to offer a brief, but usually humbling experience, of the knowledge, skill, and wisdom necessary to effectively preside over a Chapter of Royal Arch Masons. While a certain level of commotion in the Temple is intended to interrupt the appropriate and harmonious proceedings of the Chapter, the actual Presiding High Priest must take care to ensure the lesson does not reach too great a level of disorder.

Grand Lodge Alternative

There will be many occasions when Brethren will seek out Capitular Masonry for the singular purpose of acquiring the Past Master Degree in satisfaction of qualifying requirements to ascend to the East in a Symbolic Lodge. There are two primary schools of thought to address this issue. First, is the belief that an introduction to Royal Arch Masonry, through the Mark Master and Past Master degrees, will inspire Candidates to complete their Masonic journey and become actively involved as Royal Arch Masons. The second consideration involves redirecting those Candidates, only seeking to accomplish the singular criteria, to the Grand Lodge where they may receive a virtual Past Master Degree in satisfaction of the qualifying requirement.

While it certainly remains the prerogative of the High Priest to accept a petition for the Capitular Degrees, it is strongly urged every consideration first be given to protecting the integrity and strengthening the value of Royal Arch Masonry in the best interest of all Companions.

Most Excellent Master Degree:

The Most Excellent Master Degree is a product of American innovation. The earliest record of conferral dates back to 1783 in a Royal Arch Chapter in Middletown, Connecticut. It dramatizes the historical incidents of the completion and dedication of the First Temple of Jerusalem, and why King Solomon, instead of his father King David, was chosen to build the Temple. Filled with pageantry, the work of building the Temple which was dramatically halted during the conferral of the Master Mason Degree is finally completed. Here the Candidate learns work once rejected by the builders as rubbish is instead of great importance as the headstone of the corner to complete the Temple. The underlying lessons teach that building one's life and character requires enthusiasm, perseverance and sacrifice, but in service to God the faithful and dedicated will in time, receive reward for their practical and spiritual labors.

The Most Excellent Master Degree is the only degree that forcibly brings attention to the completion and dedication of King Solomon's Temple; the very concept upon which all Masonic symbolism has been based. It is the ritual authority which confers the opportunity and obligation for a Royal Arch Mason to disseminate light and knowledge to less informed brethren.

In American and York Rite Masonry, the Capitular Degree of Most Excellent Master serves as the preparatory basis for Companions who choose to continue their journey of Masonic discovery by receiving the knowledge of a Royal and Select Master in the Cryptic Council.

Royal Arch Degree:

Scholars have traced the earliest origins of the Royal Arch Degree to Ireland dating to the late 1600's. In England, the earliest record of the Royal Arch Degree occurs in 1738. In

1752, ambulatory or military warrants for Lodges were introduced into the organization of Freemasonry which integrated the Royal Arch Degree with the Master Mason Degree. The adopted custom in military Lodges proved instrumental in bringing Royal Arch Masonry to America as British soldiers practiced the Craft in the expanding colonies.

The Royal Arch Degree has been described as the "*climax of Ancient Craft Masonry and Masonic Symbolism*", and as "*the root and marrow of Freemasonry.*" The degree chronicles the darkest hours of Jewish history from the destruction of King Solomon's Temple and captivity in Babylon to the noble and glorious work of rebuilding the City of Jerusalem and the second Temple of God nearly 500 years later. The candidate represents one of the three sojourners dedicated to the task helping rebuild the temple as the dramatic lessons center on the fortuitous discovery and recovery of several important treasures from a hidden vault, and the restoration of the greatest of all treasures in Masonry long lost in the Third Degree - the True Word of a Master Mason. It finally reveals the full light of Ancient Craft Masonry as a complete system in accordance with the original plan. Without the Royal Arch, the Master Mason Degree "*is like a song half sung, a tale partly told, or a promise unfulfilled. The Royal Arch stands as the rainbow of promise in the sky; it stands as the promise of the resurrection, of that which was lost and that which shall be recovered!*"