

Prince Hall Cryptic Masonry

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“One of the smallest but one of the most important and certainly one of the most curious of all the rites”

Coil's Masonic Encyclopedia

What is the history or origin of the “Cryptic Rite” or council degrees? When did Prince Hall Affiliated Masons incorporate this system?

Throughout my research I have found that historians have no clue or should I say dispute as to where the Cryptic Rite originally came from. There are a plethora of theories as to whence it came such as:

- "Baltimore theory"
- "Berlin theory"
- "Stuart theory"
- "Scottish Rite theory"

I will attempt to give a short synopsis of each theory as we proceed. Remember these are all theories. Additional research can be done on these to draw your own conclusions. With research comes answers (sometimes more questions) what can you find?

Baltimore theory

From Schulz' *History of Freemasonry in Maryland*, Vol I, page 343 we find the following; Henry Wilmans in the year 1792 erected at the city of Baltimore a Grand Council of Select Masons. By lawful succession the powers so exercised by Wilmans became vested in Philip Eckle and Hezekiah Niles. However this cannot be confirmed because the records of the Lodge (Silver Key Lodge located in the city of Bremen) were said to have been were destroyed by fire, and any further information prior to 1800, prevents any further verification. (Also some believe that Eckle did not receive the degree of Royal Master until 1819 while in New York, this is also debatable because in some historians believe that Eckle believed himself to be the sole and rightful custodian of the degree of Select Master after the death of Henry Wilmans in 1795)

Berlin theory

The Scottish degrees seem to have sprung up about 1740 in all parts of France. In 1741 we can find evidence of its reach as far as Berlin, Germany. The Chevalier de Bouneville in 1754 established a Chapter at Paris, France in the Jesuit College of Clermont. The system of Freemasonry practiced by this Chapter became known as the *Rite of Perfection* or the *Rite of Heredom*. By the year 1758 the original 7 Degrees had grown to 25 and by 1801 were expanded to some 33 separate Degrees of the Scottish Rite. "According to a MS . in the possession of Kloss when he wrote his History of Freemasonry in France, the date of which he fixes at 1751 (latest), the sequence of Degrees apparently in most general use in France shortly before the rise of the Chapter of Clermont was as follows : 1° E.A.; 2° F.C; 3° M.M.; 4° Perfect Master; 5° Select Master....." (1)

Stuart theory

The Stuart Theory puts forth the idea that the Cryptic Degrees were used as a cover under which the adherents of the House of Stuart could meet and plot to recover the Throne of Great Britain on behalf of that royal house. The Stuart family ruled England starting in 1603, with a break from 1649 to 1660 after Charles I was executed by Parliament under Oliver Cromwell. Under this theory the Select Master Degree symbolizes the plan of Charles Edward Stuart, also known as the Young Pretender, under the title of James VI. He and Louis XVI, the current King of France are the two Kings represented by Solomon and Hiram of Tyre, together with the Earl of Mars and Nithsdale, and 23 others from Gaul forming the 27 that composed the Conclave. The ritual of the Select Master's degree can easily be seen to be that of a secret political movement, if one believes this theory.

Scottish Rite theory

I believe the Scottish Rite theory is an expansion of the Berlin Theory. Dr. Mackey says that the degrees were beyond doubt honorary or side degrees, belonging to and conferred by Inspectors-General of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite. Whatever claim they had to these degrees was abandoned by the resolution of the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite, passed at a meeting held in Baltimore in 1870. By that action all authority over the Cryptic degree was given up. The degrees were originally independent of one another, and were no doubt the side degrees of the Rite of Perfection, which in 1701 was brought to this side of the Atlantic by Stephen Morin. (2)

In addition; In 1761 the various Councils, Chapters and Lodges and Consistories of the Rite flourished all over the European Continent; and on the 27th August, 1761, Stephen Morin was empowered, as Inspector-General for the New World, by the Grand Consistory of Princes of the Royal Secret, convened at Paris under the presidency of Chaillon deJoinville, Substitute-General of the Order, to introduce or confer the degrees in America. Morin sailed for the West Indies, it is supposed, about the year 1762. (3)

What is the real origin of the Cryptic Rite...we might never know. I believe there is some fact as to the Scottish rite theory that continues with emergence of Stephen Morin around 1761 and then the expansion of the Rite with Philip Eckle at the end of the 1700s to the early 1800s. In the early 1800s is when these set of degrees really came into its own. It is at this time that Jeremy Ladd Cross and other like him (but none as prominent) travelled extensively and spread these, plus

other degrees, for a fee. And with this, whether by “degree peddlers” or appointed lectures there was establishment of several Councils of Royal and Select Masters. At that time degrees were not institutionalized as they are now, and were frequently legally conferred and taught by traveling Masons who earned their living by doing that. They obtained their authority from Grand Lodges or Grand Masters, but traveled widely outside the States where they had been appointed.

The first Grand council of record was in Hartford Connecticut, May 18 1819. Several councils and grand councils spread across America shortly thereafter. In June 12, 1873 the General Council of Royal Select Masters of USA was formed at New York, NY. It consisted of 34 accredited illustrious Companions and 15 Grand Councils.(4)

The Cryptic degrees were slower to take root in the Prince Hall Fraternity. It was not until August 14, 1916 that the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons for Ohio, at its session at Dayton, sanctioned the establishment of Councils of Royal and Select Masters. Three Councils were authorized: Adoniram No. 1 in Cleveland, Zabud No. 2 in Toledo, and Herald No. 3 in Columbus. On August 13, 1917, a convention of delegates from these three councils organized a Grand Council at Cincinnati, and its body was incorporated under the laws of Ohio on December 21, 1920.

Councils were soon organized in Dayton (1916), Oberlin, Boston, Zanesville, Chicago, Newark (1964), Portsmouth, Indianapolis, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and Springfield. Deputies were appointed for Pennsylvania, Indiana, Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois(1923), New York, Rhode Island and Massachusetts. It wasn't until after the Great Depression of 1929 that Council spread to other Prince Hall jurisdictions. (5)

The Prince Hall Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters, State of New York warranted by the Prince Hall Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of Ohio on May 26th, 1958, which included three subordinate councils: Alpha Council #1 (New York); Jordan Council #2 (Connecticut); and Philadelphia Council #3 (Pennsylvania) To note, this New York Grand Council R&SM has contributed to the establishment of Grand Councils R&SM in neighboring jurisdictions: Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland, Washington, D.C., North Carolina and Florida.(6)

The History of the Cryptic degrees is intriguing whether you research them in a historical or Masonic sense. It is my hope that I might have given you a starting point into our history as Cryptic Masons.

1. Gould's History of Freemasonry, 1936
2. The Cryptic Rite by Josiah H. Drummond, 1888
3. The Cryptic Rite by Josiah H. Drummond, 1888
4. Gould's History of Freemasonry, 1936
5. edited from, A History of Freemasonry Among Negroes in America by Harry E. Davis, 1946
6. <http://hariam.org/CHWR/02dyorkny.html>