

Who are the Freemasons

Based on French historian Cécile Révauger's sources among others (<http://revaugercecile.over-blog.com/article-24706237.html>) . A freemason, she was initiated in 1982 at the Grande Loge féminine de France. She left this grand lodge to join the Grand Orient de France in 2013.

Freemason secrets allegedly lurk behind everything from the planning of our nation's capital to murder. Members of the enigmatic Masonic brotherhood include prominent politicians, Founding Fathers and titans of business. In modern times, Masons are known for donating millions to charity. But who are the Freemasons and what do they stand for? Is there really a secret Freemason handshake? Here are seven things you may not know about Freemasons.

1. The Freemasons Are the Oldest Fraternal Organization in the World.

Freemasons belong to the oldest fraternal organization in the world, a group begun during the Middle Ages in Europe as a guild of skilled builders. With the decline of cathedral building, the focus of the society shifted. Today, "Freemasons are a social and philanthropic organization meant to make its members lead more virtuous and socially oriented lives," says Margaret Jacob, professor of history at University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. Grounded in the Enlightenment, the organization "still conveys [the era's] core values, religious tolerance, thirst for knowledge [and] sociability," says Cécile Révauger, a freemason, historian of Freemasonry and professor at the University of Bordeaux.

While not a secret society, per se, it does have secret passwords and rituals that originate with the medieval guild, says Jacob: "In the original guild, there were three stages: Apprentice, Fellowcraft and Master Masons who oversaw everyone working on a site. Today, these degrees are more philosophical."

Did you know? The Regius Poem, or Halliwell Manuscript, contains the earliest reference to Freemasons and was published in 1390.

2. Freemason Symbols Aren't What You Think.

Freemasons have long communicated using visual symbols drawn from the tools of stonemasonry. The "All-Seeing Eye," or Eye of Providence, while not designed by Masons, has been used by the group to represent the omniscience of God. The most well-known Freemason symbol, "The Square and Compasses," depicts a builder's square joined by a compass. The "G" at its center remains subject to dispute; some experts at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for example, believe the "G" in the symbol's center represents geometry, a critical field to the first Freemasons, while others believe it represents God, the "Grand Architect of the Universe." The Square and Compasses remains a popular symbol on Masonic rings.

There's another, lesser-known Masonic symbol drawn from nature: the beehive. "Masons were originally working men who were supposed to be as busy as bees," says Jacob. "And the beehive symbolizes the industriousness of the lodge."

3. Yes, There Is a Freemason Handshake. Several, Actually.

Freemasons greet one another with a variety of handshakes, all based on one's rank within the organization. "There is a handshake for each degree: Apprentice, Fellowcraft, and Master, i.e., the first three degrees and also in the higher degrees," says Révauger. "Each rite has its own handshakes, so there is quite a variety. They are used during Masonic ceremonies."

4. The Catholic Church Forbids Members from Being Freemasons.

While Freemasonry is not itself a religion, all its members believe in a Supreme Being, or "Grand Architect of the Universe." Members come from many faiths, but one denomination in particular bars any crossover. The Catholic Church first condemned Freemasonry in 1738, prompted by concern over Masonic temples and the secret rituals performed within them. In the 19th century, the Vatican even called the Masons "the Synagogue of Satan."

The Church went even further in 1983, declaring: "Their principles have always been considered irreconcilable with the doctrine of the Church and therefore membership in them remains forbidden. The faithful who enroll in Masonic associations are in a state of grave sin and may not receive Holy Communion." However, the 1983 <Code of Canon Law> does not impose the penalty of excommunication on Catholics belonging to the Masons.

Masonic bodies do not ban Catholics from joining if they wish to do so. There has never been a Masonic prohibition against Catholics joining the fraternity, and some Freemasons are Catholics, despite the Catholic Church's prohibition of joining the Freemasons.

5. Freemasons Inspired America's First Political Third Party.

In the realm of politics, the first third party in the United States, the Anti-Masonic Party, formed in 1828 in response to fears that the group was growing too secretive and powerful. Many of its members touted conspiracy theories about the Freemasons, with some leaders claiming that an infamous murder of the time had occurred at the hands of the Masons, in an effort to keep to keep the victim from revealing the organization's secrets.

6. It's Still a Boys' Club...Mostly.

Traditionally, Freemason membership has only been open to men. In the group's "1723 Constitutions," a kind of guidebook to the organization by James Anderson, written under the aegis of the Grand Lodge of England, women and atheists were excluded along with enslaved people.

Now, "masons come from all walks of life, provided they can afford to pay the annual subscription." But while women are allowed to join an affiliated organization called The Order of the Eastern Star, and some lodges recognize female members, "freemasonry is not as universal as it claims, since in many countries...women and atheists are still excluded." In the U.S. and Europe, it can vary city to city, lodge to lodge.

Since there is no national organization in the United States, "grand lodges in each state are a court of last resort," says Jacob. This has led to some controversial rulings: "Particularly in southern states, Freemasonry remains segregated," says Jacob. "In the United States, several Grand Lodges still refuse to recognize Prince Hall Freemasonry, i.e., African American Masons". Washington recognized Prince Hall in 1898 while Wm H. Upton was Grand Master. In the next Year, Washington Grand Lodge rescinded its recognition. It was re-recognized in June 1990.

7. Famous Freemasons Are Everywhere.

Famous Freemasons can be found throughout history: George Washington was a Master Mason, and Benjamin Franklin was a founding member of the first Masonic Lodge in America. Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Gerald Ford were Masons, as was Prime Minister of Great Britain Winston Churchill. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Davy Crockett, Duke Ellington, Nat King Cole, Henry Ford, Paul Robeson, Shaq Oneal, and astronaut Buzz Aldrin are also Freemasons.