

The Cryptic Rite

"This is one of the smallest but one of the most important and certainly one of the most curious of all the rites. It might well be called the rite of Aeneas, because of its long wanderings. One of its oddities is that the two degrees of *Royal Master* and *Select Master* have associated with them a ceremony known as *Super Excellent Master*, which is not considered a degree, yet it is more dramatic than most Masonic degrees. Another peculiarity is that there has long been a difference of opinion as to which of the two degrees should be conferred on the candidate first. They should both precede the Royal Arch, yet, in early days were often limited to Royal Arch Masons. The *Super Excellent* is the dramatization of an incident mentioned in the lecture of the Principal Sojourner in the *Royal Arch Degree*. Both the *Royal* and the *Select* are of the type known as French Ecosais, Ninth Arch, or Secret Vault degrees and the name Cryptic was given them by Rob Morris as derived from the Greek *crupe* or the Latin *crypta*, meaning vault.

The assumption, often indulged, that the *Royal* and the *Select* were always associated is incorrect, for the *Select*, under the name *Select Masons of 27*, was contained in the rituals brought to this country by Stephen Morin about 1762 as a side degree of the Rite of Perfection, while Royal Master was not so included and is not mentioned in any preserved record until a much later date. Hughan stated that Cryptic Masonry was worked in England from about 1760 but died out, though it continued in Scotland under one branch of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar. It evidently died out there also.

Attempts to fix the origin and trace the course of these degrees in the United States is rather baffling, not only because of the shifting control over them and sometimes the absence of any control, but particularly by the tendency of writers upon the subject to refer to the two degrees jointly as though they had always constituted a pair. The latter association of the degrees and the frequent reference to them as Royal and Select Masters naturally led careless writers into the anachronism of supposing their present relationship always to have existed. Writers also, instead of examining closely upon finding one degree mentioned, have used the term "degrees" or "Cryptic Rite" to cover up lack of definition.

Philip C. Tucker, Grand Master of Vermont (1847-1861) and Grand High Priest (1852-1857), said, " We have good authority for saying that as early as 1766 they were conferred in the city of Albany." He referred to the *Royal* and *Select* degrees and proceeded to state that they came from France and were soon introduced into Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Maryland and that the Grand Councils, Grand Chapters, General Grand Chapter, Lodges of Perfection, Councils of Princes of Rose Croix, and Supreme Councils of the Scottish Rite, all at different times, claimed control over them. A committee of the Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons of Vermont found in 1850 that the two Cryptic degrees were conferred in that state before Royal Arch Masonry was established there.

E. F. Schulz in History of Freemasonry in Maryland, Vol I, p.344, stated, "It is said that the Royal and Select degrees were conferred by Andrew Francken in Albany in 1769." No evidence has ever been discovered that either of the degrees was conferred at Albany until long after that year.

The Select Master degree, under the name, Select Masons of Twenty-seven, was conferred at Charleston, S.C. in 1783, and that is probably the earliest that either degree was worked in this country. One of the earliest investigations of the history of the degrees was made by a committee of the Grand Chapter R.A.M. of South Carolina to determine whether that body rightfully had the control over the degrees that it was then exercising. The report of the committee was dated February 26, 1829, and with it was found a note written by Moses Holbrook, chairman of the committee. The time of the investigation was late enough to permit the committee to fall into the common error of linking the two degrees together and thus to give *Royal Master* an apparent existence in the South earlier than the facts warranted. The report stated that, in February, 1783, Dr. Frederick Dalcho, Dr. Isaac Auld, Dr. James Moultrie, Sr. and Moses C. Levy (three of whom were still living in 1829) had received the degrees in the Lodge of Perfection at Charleston; that Joseph Myers, one of the Deputies who established the Council Princes of Jerusalem at Charleston, Feb 20, 1788, deposited in the archives certified copies of the "degrees of Royal and Select Masters from Berlin in Prussia"; that, from 1788, the Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite at Charleston had steadily conferred the degrees and that, in 1828, a number of councils of *Select Masters* were active. The committee reported that it had seen and read the first copy of "the degrees" that had come to America and copies of old charters that had been returned when start Grand Councils were formed. It appears that chairman Holbrook left a manuscript copy of the degrees of *Royal Master* and *Select Master* containing a note in his handwriting, dated March 15, 1830, quoting from "Brother Snell's book" as follows: "Supreme Council Chambers, Charleston, S.C>, 10th Feb., 1827. I hereby hereby certify that the detached degrees, called Royal and Select Master or Select Masons of 27 were regularly given by the Sublime Grand Lodge of Perfection (No. 2 in the U.S.A.) established by Brother Isaac Da Costa in Charleston in February, 1783, one of the original members of which, Most Illustrious Moses C. Levy, is still alive and a member of it to this day, without ceasing to be so for a day. *** Brother Myers shortly after this (February 20, 1788) resided some time in Norfolk, Richmond and Baltimore previous to his removal to Europe, and he communicated a knowledge of the degrees to a number of brethren in those cities. The original copy is still in my keeping and agreeably to the obligations of the same, and the Grand Constitutions governing those degrees, viz., Royal and Select Masons of 27 it is correct and lawful to give them either to Sublime Masons who have arrived at the Knight of the Ninth Arch (13th) or to Companions of the 3d Arch (Royal Arch Masons).

In that short account some confusion of names is evident. Subsequent investigation has shown that the Charleston bodies did not possess the *Royal Master* degree in that early period, and it is unlikely that Myers had deposited a ritual of that degree in the archives, nor is it established that such degree came from Berlin or even Europe. After 1788, the *Select* degree was regularly conferred at Charleston and councils of that degree were active there in 1828. On the recommendation of the above mentioned committee, the Grand Chapter of Royal Arch Masons of South Carolina surrendered custody of the *Cryptic* degrees in 1829. Dr. William L. Cummings of New York, who possesses one of the Stephen Morin rituals as well as one of the largest collections of rituals of degrees generally, avers that only *Select Masons of 27* or the later *Select Master* was in use at Charleston in the 18th century and that *Royal Master* was never conferred with *Select Master* until after 1821 and then first in New York. That statement is confirmed by Mackey's *History of Freemasonry* (by W.R. Singleton) Vol. VI, p.1556, where, quoting Schulz (Hist. FM in Md., Vol. I, pp.335-344), it is stated that Holbrook was in error in 1829 as to Royal Master, since that degree was first worked in the northern states.

Savannah, Ga. is the next place where the *Select Master* degree is found, for Moses Cohen, on Nov. 9, 1790, issued to Abram Jacobs a diploma for Select Masons of 27 and the diary of Jacobs relates his visit to Savannah in 1792 and his conferring of that degree at various places in Georgia.

At Baltimore, Md., the Select degree and no other seems to have been in control of Philip P. Eckel and Hezekiah Niles acting jointly. An old document signed by them authorized a certain person to open and hold a chapter at Baltimore and recite: " Whereas, In the year of the Temple 2792 [A.D. 1792] our thrice illustrious Brother Henry Wilmans, Grand elect, Select, Perfect Sublime Mason, Grand Inspector General, and Grand Master of Chapters of the Royal Arch, Grand Elect and Perfect of the Master's Lodge and Council of Knights of the East, Prince of Jerusalem, Patriarch Noachite, Knight of the Sun and Prince of the Royal Secret, did by virtue of the powers in him legally vested, establish, ordain, erect and support a Grand Council of Select Masons in the city of Baltimore," etc. Henry Wilmans was a native of the city of Bremen, Germany, and came to Baltimore in 1790. In 1793, he became charter master of *Concordia* Lodge and, in the same year, Deputy Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Maryland, succeeding to the position of Grand Master the following year. He died in 1795. The source of his authority over the *Select* degree is unknown, but doubtless it was simply the privilege of an Inspector General to confer side degrees.

Mackey (Singleton) cited above, page 1557, concluded: " while the degree of Royal Master or Select of Twenty Seven may have been conferred in various places prior to 1792, yet we must conclude that the organization of a council of Select masons in Baltimore by Philip P. Eckel and Hezekiah Niles under the authority of Henry Wilmans was the very first organized effort to propagate the rite in this country. Niles, writing in *Ahiman Rezon* in 1827, stated that he had been told that a regular chapter of the *Select* degree was held at Charleston many years before but had become dormant and that he was not aware that the degree was then worked anywhere other than Baltimore.

The Royal Master degree is mentioned in only a few scattered references prior to the year 1804, when it is claimed that Abram Jacobs went to New York and conferred the degree upon Thomas Lownds. In Gould's *History of Freemasonry*, (Scribner) Vol. I, p. 300, it is stated that the earliest authoritative account of the working of the degree occurs in the records of *Columbian* Council No. 1 of New York in 1807. It has been stated, but also doubted, the Joseph Cerneau conferred the Royal Master degree upon Lownds in 1807, and J. Ross Robertson in his *The Cryptic Rite*, Toronto, 1880, declared that: "In 1808 the dispute between Gourgas and Joseph Cerneau commenced. Lownds sided with the latter and went over to him, taking, so Gourgas says, the Royal and Select Degrees. The credit for organizing the first body of the Cryptic Rite must be given to Lownds. He formed, with others, of course, Sept. 2, 1810, the *Columbian* Grand Council of Royal Master Masons." This body, on Dec. 8, 1821, received within its fold a Council of Select Masters. On January 25, 1823, 'Columbian Grand Council' constituted itself a Grand Council for the state, and issued warrants as late as 1827."

That seems to have been the first permanent association together of the two degrees and *Columbian* Grand Council appears to have been the first organized body of Royal and Select Masters anywhere. It began warranting subordinate councils in 1823. Dr. William L. Cummings is of the opinion that Royal Master and Select Master were conferred as companion degrees for the first time in 1810 and that *Columbian* Council No.1 worked only Royal Master until 1817, when the Super Excellent Master working was adopted; that in 1817, Lownds created a council of Select Master by

conferring the degree on 10 brethren who were mostly members of Columbian Council No. 1 that a week later the new body merged with Columbian Council No. 1 and that the combined body conferred the three degrees or "orders" of *Royal Master*, *Super Excellent Master* and *Select Master*, apparently in that order. Lownds remained Master of Columbian Council No. 1 for several years, and it is said that, prior to the adoption of the Select degree, that body conferred several other side degrees, such as the *Order of the Garter*, the *Illustrious and Invincible Order of St George of Capidosia*, and *Knight of the Round Table*. The ritual of only the last named of the three side degrees has been preserved.

On January 25, 1828, at a convention called for the purpose, the *Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of New York* was formed. Another Grand Council existed in 1854 which was composed largely of adherents of the schismatic *St. John's Grand Lodge*. It is said that Philip P. Eckel of Baltimore did not receive the *Royal Master* degree until 1819 and then from Wadsworth of New York.

Schulz, in his *History of Freemasonry in Maryland*, Vol. I., p.344 states: "The Royal Master Degree was first known and worked in the Eastern States, while the Select was first known, and at a much earlier date, in the South and Middle States." In the United States, the *Select Master* and later the *Royal Master* degree were at first side degrees of the Scottish Rite and were often conferred by lecturers and by Deputies of the Southern Supreme Council, the two most prominent of whom were Jeremy L. Cross and John Barker. Cross received the Select degree from Eckel and Niles in 1816 and disseminated it through Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky, Mississippi, Louisiana, Delaware, New York, New Hampshire, Vermont, New Jersey and Virginia. He conferred the degree only on Royal Arch Masons, whereas Eckel and Niles deemed it introductory to the Royal Arch Degree and conferred it on Mark Master Masons. Cross formed a council of *Select Masters* at Windsor, Vermont, in 1817, Barker established councils in Alabama and Mississippi. In 1818, Cross received the *Royal Master* degree and conferred both degrees in Connecticut in that year, the first council of Royal and Select Masters there being *New Haven* No. 10 Grand Councils were formed as follows: Connecticut, 1819; Virginia, 1820; North Carolina, 1822; and others according to the table following*. In 1817, the Grand Chapter R.A.M. of Maryland authorized its chapters to confer the Select Master degree and ten years later it sent a circular recommending that other Grand Chapters assume control of the Select Master degree, although, as above stated, the Grand Chapter of South Carolina relinquish the *Royal* and *Select* in 1829. The Grand Chapter of the District of Columbia took control of the Cryptic degrees in 1829, and in the same year, the General Grand Chapter R.A.M. of the United States resolved that the *Royal* and *Select* degrees were to be placed under control of the State Grand Chapters. After 1827, there was a period of some years during which both independent Grand Councils of Royal and Select Masters and Royal Arch Chapters were striving for control or, possibly, coordinate control of the degrees and, at the same time, lecturers or even Deputy Inspectors-General (such as John Barney of the Charleston Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite) authorized both Councils of Royal and Select Masters and Councils of Princes of Jerusalem to control the degrees.

In 1847, the General Grand Chapter authorized chapters to confer the Royal and Select Degrees in states where no councils of that rite existed and, in 1850, the Northern Supreme Council, of the Scottish Rite issued a decree claiming the Royal and Select Degrees as its exclusive property in the North. The Southern Supreme Council did likewise in the South. In 1853, the General Grand Chapter reversed its position and renounced its claim to the Royal and Select Degrees but, in spite

thereof, the Grand Chapter of Maryland (until 1872) and the Grand Chapter of Virginia (from 1841 to the present day) retained them, as did the Grand Chapter of West Virginia after its formation. Other Grand Chapters too control of the degrees even after the renunciation of 1853, as follows: Texas from 1854 to 1907 (and still has a somewhat closer relation between chapters and councils than elsewhere); Illinois from 1877 to 1882; Mississippi from 1877 to 1888; Kentucky from 1878 to 1881; Arkansas from 1878 to 1881; Wisconsin from 1878 to 1881; Nebraska from 1878 to 1886; and South Carolina from 1880 to 1881.

Another fact about which there has been some quandary rather than dispute is the order in which the degrees are usually conferred. As explained under *DEGREES V, ROYAL MASTER, SELECT MASTER AND SUPER EXCELLENT MASTER*, the Select Master should precede the Royal. No data are available on the history of the Super Excellent Master ceremony, which is perhaps the only place in any rite where a drama is performed as no part of any degree or a degree itself. It is not found in the lists of degrees existing when the European Continent was deluged with degrees, but neither is Royal Master or Select Master unless the latter is included in one of the doubtful lists of degrees of the *Chapter of Clermont*. On the whole, the Royal and Select Degrees are among the best in Freemasonry and the Super Excellent is one of the most stirring dramas in the whole galaxy.

The Cryptic Rite as now worked was reintroduced into England by charter from the Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of New York in 1871, and the Grand Council for England was formed in 1873. Cryptic Masonry reentered Scotland by charter from the Grand Council of Illinois in 1878 and the Grand Council of Scotland was formed in 1880. As now worked in England, the Cryptic Rite consists of Most Excellent Master (a short form of that degree as worked in American Chapters), Royal Master , Select Master and Super Excellent Master.

An event which may not only remove the isolation of the Cryptic Rite but may even strengthen and consolidate the York Rite was the decision of the Grand Encampment of Knights Templar of the United States in 1958 to give State Grand Commanderies the option of declaring the Royal and Select Master degrees prerequisite to the degrees of the Commanderies. A number of grand Commanderies, including California, have taken such action.

The General Grand Council of Royal and Select Masters of the United States was slow in formation. In 1871, the Grand Council of Massachusetts took the initiative in calling a convention of representatives which met in New York City on June 12, 1872, with 14 Grand Councils represented. It was resolved that the Cryptic Degrees should be under the exclusive jurisdiction of Grand Councils and that no members should be recognized, except those who received the degrees in a Council of Royal and Select Masters or by authority of a Supreme Council of the Scottish Rite. This was a harsh measure, for the degrees had been quite generally conferred by Royal Arch chapters and, therefore, the resolution aroused considerable rancor, and operated to delay the ultimate objective. At a second convention in 1873, it was resolved that the degrees should be conferred in the order of *Royal Master, Select Master*, and that the *Super Excellent* should be optional. Other conventions were held in 1873 and 1874. At a convention in Detroit, Michigan, Aug. 23, 1880, a constitution was adopted for a General Grand Chapter to become effective when ratified by 9 Grand Councils. By March 1, 1881, this had been done by the grand Councils of New York, Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, Maryland, Tennessee, Massachusetts, Alabama, Louisiana and South Carolina. Its first meeting was in Denver, Colorado, in 1883, with the above Grand Council (except Alabama) present and, in addition here

were representatives from California, Florida, Kansas, Maine, Missouri, and New Hampshire. The Grand Councils of Georgia, South Carolina and Vermont indicated their adhesion and Arkansas joined in 1886.

Remaining aloof from the General Grand Council were Connecticut, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, North Carolina, Kentucky, Iowa, Nebraska, Wisconsin and Mississippi. Virginia and West Virginia had no Grand Councils, the degrees there always having been conferred in Royal Arch Chapters. The Grand Councils of North Carolina, Iowa, Nebraska and Mississippi still retained the Chapter system, though all of them subsequently abandoned it. Wisconsin and Texas, though having Grand Councils, adopted systems peculiar to themselves in that the relations between councils and chapters were still intimate. In 1889, the General Grand Chapter ameliorated the harshness of the resolution of 1872 by authorizing each State Grand Council to determine the status of Royal and Select Masters in their several jurisdictions. Late , all the Grand Chapters joined the national body except Connecticut, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Illinois and Texas and by 1948, Massachusetts had withdrawn and Michigan had joined. In 1942, The General Grand Council resolved to recognize the Royal and Select Master Degrees as conferred in the Grand Chapters of Virginia and West Virginia. New Mexico had not, up to 1952, formed a Grand Council, though it has councils under charters from the General Grand Council as do Canal Zone, Mexico, Philippines, Hawaii and Alaska. "

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