

The Royal Arch & Council—Confusion & struggle over degrees

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The early evolution of Cryptic Masonry and its degrees in the United States creates a vortex for early issues, questions, and power moves. Initially detached degrees and not associated the early 1800s brought a slow but gradual shift as the coalesced into a system of work, and in turn bodies of Cryptic Masons arose. Yet the early decades were confusing, and their initial detached nature left many scratching their heads, this coupled with their place in the timeline of American Masonry made for cloudy skies. Early Grand Chapters were quick to assert authority over the work, empower chapters, and seek control when able or possible. To that end, let's wade into the events that led to the confusion of the early American/York Rite family relationship. The challenges of the Council and Chapter nominally begin in 1829 (and was mentioned again in 1850) when the General Grand Chapter addresses the topic as such in the constitution:

No royal arch Mason within the jurisdiction of the general Grand Chapter shall be permitted to confer any degree in Masonry not recognized as a constitutional degree; nor to establish any society of masons not recognized as a constitutional body. And the first four officers of the General Grand chapter, or any three of them, shall in all cases have authority to decide all constitutional questions under this section.

In lieu of any action under this section, the General Grand Chapter in 1829 adopted a resolution stating,

It is satisfactorily proved to this General Grand Chapter, that the constitution of Councils of Royal and Select Master Masons in different parts of the United States, by sundry persons, has been without any legitime authority:

And whereas, those degrees are conferred in Some Chapters, under the authority of the General Grand Chapter; and whereas, it was proved that it was the only and sole intention of the Most Excellent Companions from whom these degrees emanated, that they should be conferred under the authority of the Royal Arch Chapters; therefore,

Resolved, That this General Grand Chapter cordially recommend the different Councils in the United States, to adopt measures to place those degrees under the authority of the state Grand Chapters.

They further authorized Grand Chapters to make arrangements as needed to confer the Council Degrees in Chapters within their jurisdictions.

The General Grand Chapter's resolution and recommendations received serious attention years later in 1849 when the inaugural Committee on Correspondence for the Grand Chapter of Missouri took the topic up. The committee members, John Daggett, Joseph Foster, & Fredric

Billon, remarked, "The Royal and Select Degrees seem to occupy the attention of all. The order in which they shall be conferred, by what body, whether by Council or by chapters, appears to perplex and annoy some of our sister Grand Chapters, as though the existence of the whole Masonic Fraternity was staked on that single issue."

The committee reported its opinion that the degrees have garnered more discussion and attention than "their importance demands", harsh words perhaps and yet they continued in their report,

Neither of them develops any new principle, or adds a single ray of light which the intelligent Royal Arch Mason should not possess without them. And it would be far better for the craft that these degrees should cease to exist as such, then to continue the present strife and contention about either their chronology or location...

If royal arch masonry is incomplete without them, then they are a part and parcel of it, and should be so communicated, and thus replace that which has been abstracted to feed the cumulative desires of the age. The expression that 'they are the link which connects those without the veil with those who are within' is certainly very pretty, but when analyzed, on true Masonic principles, it will be found wanting in the other two great Masonic requisites, wisdom and strength....

It is much to be regretted, that any of the Grand Chapters, State or General, should have permitted these degrees to be cumulated under their jurisdiction, and the authority to confer them, separate and apart, is at least doubtful, if not positively restricted by Section 9, Article I of the General Grand Constitution. But the evil has been permitted; discord and confusion, the legitimate fruits of cumulation, are producing the sad works of alienation, and it now behooves us to apply the proper Masonic remedy and put this cause of discord forever from our midst....

Your committee therefore suggests that the Royal and Select Degrees shall not be conferred within this jurisdiction until the General Grand Chapter or its proper officers, shall determine, - not by suggestion, but by positive law or instruction, the order and manner in which they shall hereafter be conferred. And it is earnestly hoped that when the General Grand Chapter shall settle the question (for settle it, it must) that all who owe it allegiance will cheerfully submit-even though these degrees should be surrendered to that body which perhaps possesses higher claims....

In 1844 at the General Grand Chapter's Triennial Session the matter of the cryptic degrees was sent to a special committee, they returned the 1829 preamble and added "That it is the sense of this General Grand Chapter, that conferring the Degrees of Royal and Select Master should be subsequent to that of the Royal Arch Degree."

Then at the next triennial, held in 1847, the Grand Chapter of Tennessee offered up an amendment that struck the earlier section and now listed the degrees EA- RAM-RM and SM. This failed. The solutions of 1844 did not quell the matter though and controversy still came along. Suggestions rose that to avoid issues forming a General Grand Council would provide the solution.

In 1850 a committee reported that it was inexpedient to take any action on the formation of a General Grand Council. They further adopted a resolution declaring the constitutional degrees those of the Lodge, Chapter, Encampment, Appendant Orders, Councils, and AASR. Missouri's Committee on Correspondence in 1851 gave their response to such action plainly speaking of the General Grand Chapters rush to heal Royal Arch Masons made in England but doing nothing to address the "confused condition of the Royal & Select degrees", alluding that it is perhaps too late now to disclaim jurisdiction as bodies chartered in the last 10-15 years carry those degrees as norm.

Just 3 years later the situation closed when the General Grand Chapter declared their control only over the Mark Master, Past Master, & Most Excellent Master degrees as well as that of the Holy Royal Arch.