

Jeremy L. Cross & the Cryptic Rite of Masonry

I will focus primary on the Select Master degree for this talk. No one knows where or how this degree developed, and all that can be said is that it belongs to the oldest strata of work that came later to be a part of our Masonic system of work. Its first debut in writing is as part of a Masonic system called the French Rite, which became extinct about 1700. The elements that became our Third degree also derived in part from this peculiar old European Rite. Our degree was there known by the name of Select Master of 27, and was the 5° of that system.

It is known that the Select Master of 27 was brought to the West Indies in 1766 by Stephan Morin, and it is very likely that he also brought over the Royal Master degree, although only the Select is contained in the copy of his manuscripts made by Henry Andrew Francken. The Select was used as a regular degree in the first Council of Princes of Jerusalem in Charlestown prior to 1800. When, in 1801, the AASR was formed, its founders chose from a large number of Masonic degrees from four different Masonic systems to form the 33 chosen to be the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite. The chief unselected degrees then were retained as “side” degrees, meaning they were not a part of the main system but were considered desirable to witness. In 1801 there were 17 of these according to “The Cryptic Rite” by Robertson and Drummond, published in 1888.

In 1820 the Grand Chapter of Maryland, meaning of what we would now call York type degrees, proposed to set up a Council at Baltimore. The promoter was brother Philip P. Eckel, a prominent Mason of German extract who was later to issue a warrant for the dissemination of the Select degree to Jeremy Cross. Eckel was a member of the Scottish Rite, and felt the side degrees should have their own place in Masonry. Agreeing with this, the Supreme Council formally ceded claim to the Select and Royal Master degrees to the Grand Council of Baltimore in 1870.

I became interested in Jeremy Cross because of his involvement with Masonry here in Vermont. He was born in 1783 in Haverhill, New Hampshire. In 1807 he joined St. John’s lodge in Portsmouth, NH. He was a hatter by trade, not one who made hats, but a sort of traveling salesman of hats, probably living out of his wagon filled with hats and camping out or staying at inns as his fortune allowed. As such, he crisscrossed Vermont and NH plying his trade and expanding his Masonic connections as he went. This was to be a life long pattern for the man. Demitting from St. John’s lodge, he joined North Star lodge at Lancaster, NH. He “paid his shekel” in Aurora Mark Lodge at Bradford, VT; was “arched” in Champlain Chapter at St. Albans, VT; and he received the Select Master degree at Hopkinton CT.

This last degree would not have been conferred by a Council, since at that time the Select and Royal Master degrees were being worked either by Blue Lodges or by York type Chapters. This was the period of quite a ferment of organization of work, and when Thomas Smith Webb was actively promoting what was to become the first Grand Chapters of the York Rite. Jeremy Cross was by this time using his reportedly prodigious memory to earn extra income by practicing as a Masonic lecturer. He was one of many such men- our own John Barney is another example- who used this period

of hunger for Masonic work to become “professional Masons”. He would stop at a town and visit the local lodges, presenting various certificates of his Masonic standing and offer, for a price, to teach degree work and lecture work to the local members. Although not apparently having any formal schooling, he had taught himself to read and write and evidently possessed a very keen mind. I read that he delivered the work with precision, and invariably used the same floor work and gestures each time he did it.

Cross actually did study under the famous Thomas Webb, journeying to Providence, RI, in 1816 to “perfect himself in the work of the Chapter”. It is evident that he was very excited by the York degrees, and carefully added to his stock of Masonic certificates at every opportunity. In the same year he lectured before the Grand Lodge of MA in Boston, receiving their “sanction”. Following this, he traveled to New York, where the Central Grand Chapter was to meet. This was one of the first attempts to set up a General Grand Chapter. It was here he met Philip Eckel of Baltimore, and of course many other important Masonic figures. Here he also had printed a certificate entitling him to confer various Chapter degrees, over the signatures of the Grand Chapter officers. Although some have claimed this was a forgery, he proudly printed it in the introductory pages of his “True Chart” published three years later.

He continued on to Pennsylvania, where he met the same fate as Webb and many others. Being declared an “innovator on the Body of Masonry” he was thrown out of the State by the Grand Lodge. Undaunted, he continued on to Baltimore, where the famous certificate to confer the degrees of Royal and Select Masters on any group of the essential nine Royal Arch Masons wherever he traveled was granted to him. This was like money in the bank. You might have noticed that he was not selling hats any longer, for the Masonic trade was far more lucrative. One imagines he had by this time transformed himself from country bumpkin to quite the traveling gentleman. This information is from James Case, historian of the Grand Council of CT, R&SM.

Here are some interesting quotes concerning the further adventures of Brother Cross:

“He gave a warrant, May 27th, 1818, for a Council at Springfield, Mass., and during the autumn he organized three others in Connecticut. In the meantime, John H. Cotton, by authority of Cross, had established seven other Councils in Vermont.” *

“I have seen copies of many of these Charters and they purported in terms to be Councils of Select Masters, and to authorize the conferring of the Select Degree only. In some of the Councils thus created, the Royal Degree was not conferred for several years afterwards. But some time in the year 1818, probably in January, Cross obtained the Royal Degree and soon conceived the idea of uniting the two in one. On March 21st, 1818, Cross says in his diary that he and Comp. Hosmer called on Comp. Stow at Middleton, Conn., and “conferred on him two degrees, Royal and Select Master.” On May 15, 1818, a committee of Boston Council reported “that it is expedient to cultivate in this Council the degrees of R. Master, S. E. Master, S. Master of 27 and K. of Round Table ;” but the Select Degrees were not conferred till May 19, 1819, and then they were not conferred as part of a system, but as independent degrees.” *

Cross traveled very widely, became Grand Lecturer for Grand Chapter of CT in 1818. He published "True Masonic Chart or Hieroglyphic Monitor" in December 1819. This was pretty much a straight copy of Thomas Webb's "Monitor" but with better illustrations. One of these illustrations was destined to become very famous. "The 'Monument' with such components as the 'Weeping Virgin', 'Broken Column' and 'Father Time', often attributed to the inventive genius of Cross and Doolittle, definitely was not. The text of the lecture is in the cipher notes of John Barney in the ritual as he obtained it from Gleason at Boston in 1817. You will recall that when Barney traveled down to study under Webb he was too busy and turned Barney over to his star student, Gleason. An earlier and much better engraving appears on a wall chart published by 'Comp. H. Parmalee' in Philadelphia under the title of 'Masonic Mirror and Symbolic Chart' and for which a copyright was secured in August 1818." (James Case opp. cit.)

Cross sold endless rituals of Cryptic Masonry to lodges, and ran an apron supply business, contracting for the manufacture of Masonic aprons, especially Chapter ones, together with other Chapter ritual items. He finally retired to the family farm in NH and died on January 26, 1860.

Finally I will close with two quotes from Mackey:

"Robert Morris, of Kentucky, was the first to use the title " Cryptic " in designating the Council degrees. The word is derived from the Latin crypticus, meaning subterranean, or concealed, and that from the Greek krupte, which signifies a vault, or subterranean passage. "

"The apron of a Royal Master is black, lined and edged with red, triangular in form in allusion to the sacred delta " For years I thought the Council in Barre, VT, was using old Commandery aprons for their Council meetings. Just another humbling example of how wrong my assumptions can be.

***From The Cryptic Rite by Robertson & Hayden**

Thank you and God Bless:

Eric Ginette October 2008