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A Secret Society, Spilling a Few Secrets

By JAMES BARRON OCT. 4, 2006

For more than two centuries, the Freemasons and their grandiose rituals have played a secretive, mysterious role in American life. One of the Masons' symbols looks a lot like the all-seeing eye on the back of every \$1 bill. And look whose picture is on the other side.

George Washington was not the first Mason, and not the only famous one. Mozart worked thinly disguised touches of Masonry into operas. Fourteen presidents and everyone from the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale to the comedian Red Skelton belonged. Masons presided when the cornerstone was laid at the Statue of Liberty.

But the Masons' numbers have been steadily dwindling — whatever their secrets are, they apparently do not have one for avoiding death — and their ranks have been graying. So the [New York State](#) Masons have followed other state Masonic societies in doing something that they would have once considered heretical: they are actively reaching out for new members. And, in the process, a famously reticent fraternal organization that now puts a premium on its community service has lifted its veil of secrecy just a bit.

The Masons are not giving out the secret words that members are supposed to say to get into meetings (although these days, simply showing a dues card might do). But the Masons are giving public tours of the New York Grand Lodge Headquarters.

So people can see the gilded ceiling, the marble walls, the benches along the sides for the rank and file and, at either end, the thronelike chairs for high-ranking Masons. And, in a conference room next door, there is more gold, though it is only paint on a copy of a larger-than-life statue of George Washington.

The lodge also hired a public relations firm to spread the word about its

225th anniversary, which was last month. And the Masons have run advertisements in movie theaters and run one-day classes to award the first three Masonic degrees in a single session. Until then, would-be Masons had to spend months learning what they needed to know to rise from Entered Apprentice to Fellowcraft to Master Mason.

“We’re still not thinking of it as recruiting or trying to amass people,” said Thomas M. Savini, the director of the library at the New York Grand Lodge Headquarters, on West 23rd Street and the Avenue of the Americas, “but I think we’ve reached a point where we realized that not saying anything isn’t making it any easier.”



A statue of George Washington, in a Masonic apron, stands in the New York Grand Lodge Headquarters.
Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

They had also reached a point where they could not ignore what others were saying about them in “The Da Vinci Code” and other bestsellers like “The

Book of Fate” by Brad Meltzer.

“What ‘The Da Vinci Code’ gave us was an opportunity to say, ‘Here’s what we are,’” Mr. Savini said.

What there is, inside the grand lodge headquarters, are a dozen ornate rooms where some 60 lodges still hold meetings regularly.

Those dozen rooms have no windows. Leading the way into one of them, the Grand Master, or leader of all Masons in New York State, Neal I. Bidnick, said the layout was no different from any other lodge room in the world, with an altar and candles in the center. At the one end are two pieces of stone, each about the size of a cinder block — one uncut, the other finished.

“We take a good man and polish the rough edges,” Mr. Bidnick said. (The Masons do not admit women.)

In the hallways of the grand lodge headquarters, the walls are crowded with framed photographs of Masons past and present, but mostly past: Hubert H. Humphrey, the former vice president; and William J. Bratton, the former police commissioner who is now the chief of police in Los Angeles.

But there are fewer names on the membership rolls than there once were: 54,000 in New York, down from a high of 346,413 in 1929. Membership rose again after World War II, rising to 307,323 in 1957 before beginning a long slide.





Two Masonic leaders, Neil I. Bidnick, seated, and Thomas M. Savini, at lodge headquarters in New York, are opening up a bit to attract members. Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

As Mr. Bidnick explains it, New York's Masons are heavily involved in community service, underwriting medical research and supplying 29,000 American flags, one for every public school classroom in the city. But still there are the secret rooms where Masons gather.

“Why do we bring them into a room like this?” Mr. Bidnick asked. “Basically, all our rituals are designed to be educational. All these things they show you on TV, the assumptions are wrong.”

He described an encounter with a cable television reporter. “The woman from CNN read some passages about a rope and a hood and asked, ‘Is that what you do?’” he recalled. “It’s not.”

He has heard the conspiracy theories. “We’re often asked why we have a G” as a symbol, Mr. Bidnick said. “We had a person in here from CNN before ‘The Da Vinci Code.’ She pointed out that only in English and German does the word for God begin with a G. But masonry is an educational institution, so that G stands for geometry.”

And, on one wall, is a stained-glass panel with a G in a square and compasses.

Geometry is but one of the seven liberal arts. A Mason who could not remember the other six would need only to look up, for they are written on the ceiling: arithmetic, rhetoric, logic, grammar, music and astronomy. The four cardinal virtues — fortitude, prudence, temperance and justice — are written there, too.

And Mr. Bidnick said when Masons refer to God, they refer to the great architect of the universe. To hear him and Mr. Savini tell it, there is nothing theological in the reference. Mr. Savini said that Masonry was dogma-free. “It doesn’t tell a man how to interpret a symbol, which leaves it open to people outside to misinterpret it,” he said.

They would not describe in detail what happens in the room when members are present for a lodge meeting. Mr. Savini did dispel what he said were misconceptions — that there are secret tattoos, for example. “Masonry has nothing to do with tattoos,” he said. “You don’t get a tattoo when you become a Mason.”

Still, he himself has a tattoo, though not a Masonic tattoo.

And Mr. Savini points out that the eye on the dollar bill is not really a Masonic symbol. “We use the eye,” he said, “but opticians use the eye. It makes us look ridiculous if we say it links into some Masonic connection that was not there.”

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