

# community

THE PEOPLE, TOWNS, AND STORIES OF ISLAND LIFE • THURSDAY, AUGUST 24, 2017



STACEY RUPOLO

Back row from left, Leonard Verville, Arthur Bailow, James Morse, Robert Merrit, Colin Ouderkirk, David Berube, and Ezra Sherman. Front row, from left, Alan Reekie, Skip Tommassian, Brian Patrick Hall, Christopher Greene, Asa Vought, and Chris Height.

In early June of this year, Oriental-Martha's Vineyard Masonic Lodge, located in Oak Bluffs, celebrated the 150th anniversary of the formation of Oriental Lodge of Edgartown, founded in 1866.

The event was marked by a sumptuous dinner prepared in the Lodge's full kitchen and included presentations in the comfortable auditorium. The guest speaker was the 89th Grand Master of Massachusetts Masons, Paul Gleason. (Another Paul — Revere — held the position in the 1790s.) The event was deemed a fine success.

Oriental-Martha's Vineyard Lodge is the product of the 1994 merger of the last two lodges (out of seven) to survive on the Island: Martha's Vineyard Lodge of Tisbury and Oriental Lodge of Edgartown. The very first Island lodge, founded in 1791, was short-lived, but news reports of the day suggest

considerable, if understated, enthusiasm for the new institution.

"It was a day long to be remembered by the people of our usually quiet village, a day which will tend to make them regard Masonry with increased respect and esteem." The report was overly optimistic, but a generation later Freemasonry would take hold on Martha's Vineyard.

## Unraveling the mysteries of the Masons

The great secret is that there is no secret at all.

BY ALEX PALMER

### The Masons vs. Freemasonry

The terms are synonymous. They describe a worldwide fraternal organization dating back at least six centuries, an organization that counts some of the greatest figures in Western history among its members, an organization steeped in tradition, ritual, and a certain degree of mystery.

It is also an international organization

that donates two million dollars a day to individuals and families around the world but keeps those charitable deeds anonymous. Here on Martha's Vineyard, 160 members walk among us.

Recent conversations with lodge officers and other members went a long way in dispelling the group's mystery. On a visit to the chapter located on the Edgartown-Vineyard Haven Road, we were greeted by Worshipful Master Ezra Sherman of Edgartown, Senior Warden Bruce Nevin of Edgartown, and Junior Warden/Ritualist Alan Reekie of West Tisbury, and invited into the Main Hall, or Lodge Room.

Entering this room is at once a stirring and imposing experience. Striking images and unique objects catch the eye. A set of throne-like red upholstered chairs stand at each end and midway along one side, evoking a royal

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# Mysteries of the Masons

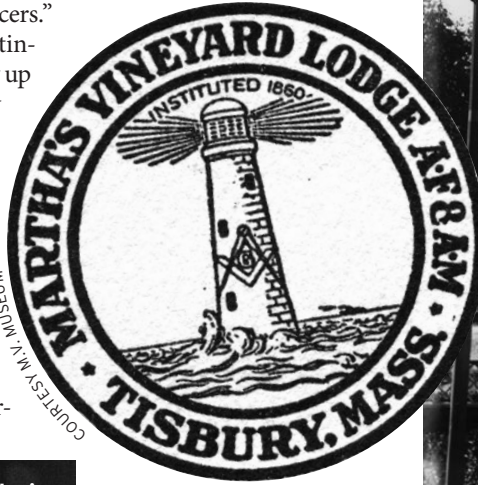
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court. Smaller cushioned chairs along the side walls suggest a hierarchical alignment.

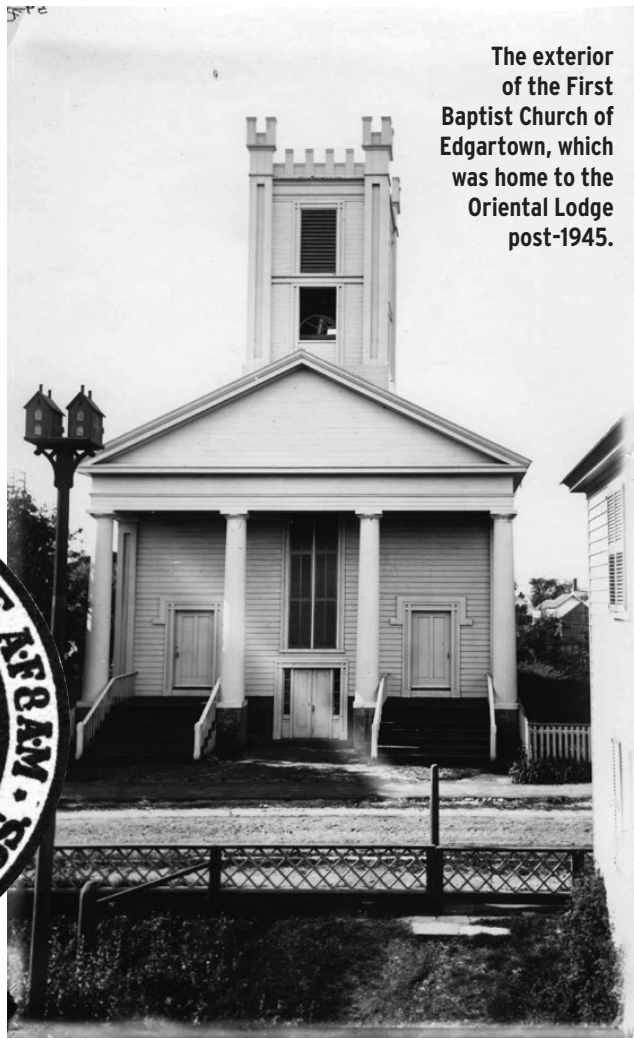
“The large chair on the eastern wall,” said Mr. Sherman, “is for the Worshipful Master. The chaplain, treasurer, and secretary are on either side of him. The Senior Warden sits in the west and the Junior Warden in the south. Each is flanked by assisting officers.” Lodge members, he continued, can work their way up through these offices by mastering levels of Masonic instruction.

Mr. Nevin, who acts as Lodge Historian, explained the connection to early stonemasons who, by the 14th century, were among the most important and abundant labor-

broader system of communication and inter-dependence among Masons took shape. They needed to know who could be trusted and relied upon. Failure to build these huge stone structures soundly could threaten their lives as well as their livelihood. Codes and symbols became their means of recognition, and among themselves, their language



Logo of the Vineyard Haven Masonic Lodge, founded 1859.



The exterior of the First Baptist Church of Edgartown, which was home to the Oriental Lodge post-1945.

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A Junior Deacon's Rod, or badge of his office.

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The Masters station on the eastern wall of the lodge.

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Officers of the Edgartown lodge in 1966.

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ers in Northern Europe. These craftsmen, far from home for long periods of time, depended on each other not only for safety but for equitable job treatment as well.

“Most historians connect Masonry to the organized groups or guilds of stonemasons who built the great cathedrals in the Middle Ages,” he said. “They developed a structure of degrees or skill levels within their craft. That skill structure helped both the masons and their employers in hiring arrangements.”

Over time, we learned, a

of instruction.

The first appearance of Masonry in the colonies was in 1733, when the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts met at the Bunch of Grapes Tavern in Boston. It spread quickly; today Masonic lodges exist in every state and in most countries.

“It’s really quite simple,” said Mr. Nevin. “The fundamental goal of Masonry is to help men realize their full potential. One way of doing that is through charitable work. We have an Angel Fund that is used to help Island families.

We provide college scholarships annually. But it goes deeper than that.”

To illuminate the Masonic philosophy, Mr. Sherman offered a pamphlet: “10 Reasons to Become a Mason.”

Words such as morality, worship, spiritual, love, and truth were prominent. Did we detect a religious undertone?

“Although those words are important to us,” said Mr. Nevin, “Masonry has no ties to religion. However, believing in a God is the first requirement for membership. It doesn’t matter which God.

In our view, belief in a supreme being is a sign of moral strength, of loyalty.”

“Like the early stonemasons,” said Mr. Reekie, “we support each other in life. We need to know you believe in something beyond yourself.”

How it felt to be a Mason was becoming clear. But what takes place in this hall to create that feeling?

Mr. Sherman suggested a walk around the great room. We stopped at the east wall, in front of the Most Worshipful chair. Midway up the wall, the Freemasonry emblem looked out upon the room — a capital G enclosed by two compasses and a carpenter’s square, the implements of an architect.

“This is part of the language of Freemasonry. The ancient stonemasons used tools of architecture and math to build great structures. We use tools as symbols of personal growth, of building strong relationships. The G can stand for God ... or geometry.”

As we made our way to the west wall, Mr. Sherman continued. “Only the most important meetings and ceremonies are held in the Temple. In addition to monthly lodge meetings, we hold initiation rituals for new members and for those advancing to a higher degree. With each degree, you are given new responsibilities and additional challenges — much of it memorization — from the codes of the ancient stonemason guilds.”

He paused. “And yes, we do use special handshakes, grips, and greetings. They remain tokens of recognition and trust, just as they were for the ancients. They are also a means of imprinting on one’s memory wise and serious truths of Masonry.”

Among those truths:

trust and reliability, virtue and truth, compassion and support.

At the western wall on either side of a dais sat a low, gray 10-inch square stone. They were similar, but not identical.

## The perfect stone

“These stones are called ash-lars,” Mr. Reekie said. “They are building blocks used in masonry. The one on the left is rough; the other is perfect.”

The symbolism here was layered. The rough stone represented the lowest degree of Masonry, the apprentice, who — centuries ago — would cut the rock under the watchful eye of the more experienced fellow craftsmen. Of the two, the perfect stone would fit more closely with other stones, would make a better building block. It followed that the perfect ashlar also stood for a more refined Mason, one who had attained enlightenment.

Benjamin Franklin, whose 60 years of Masonry service earned him the status of Illustrious Brother, once observed, “The great secret of Freemasonry is that there is no secret at all.”

By the time of Franklin’s initiation in 1730, all of the original codes, symbols, and instructive ritual of Freemasonry had been published in London newspapers for all to see.

“You asked about our purpose,” said Mr. Sherman. “It’s not about being mysterious or clinging to the past. It’s about mutual support. It’s about the Angel Fund. It’s about fulfilling your potential.”

“It has been said,” added Mr. Reekie, “that the only great secret of Freemasonry is finding out who you really are. **mv**”

## Becoming a better man

“When I was a kid/young adult I had a few people I looked up to with great admiration. Two of them in particular were my high school lacrosse coaches. My senior year, our team took a trip down to Maryland to play. On our trip, we went to Baltimore and were walking through the city. I was trailing behind, checking out the harbor, and I witnessed my coach walk up to a homeless veteran, he shook his hand and gave him some money and told him to go get a good meal. He caught me watching him, I told him that was really nice of him. He told me “being a man isn’t about what you have, it’s about helping others if you have the ability to.” I told his son about it and he told me his dad was a Freemason and was always doing things like that. After that, I always wanted to be a part of the Freemasons. Joining the lodge enables you to be a part of a group of like-minded men, who genuinely care

about each other, the community, and mankind in general. That’s what I get from being a member. The desire to be a better man, better brother, better friend and family member, and a better man in our community.

The Freemason’s are for sure misunderstood on a regular basis. Being a young-ish member of the lodge, I’ve had a lot of questions from my peers about what goes on behind closed doors and what it’s all about? if I’ve found out where we’re hiding the treasure yet? are all presidents required to be Freemasons? have I learned about the illuminati yet?! I always respond by saying, “If you’re so interested, ask a brother to join up!” Our history proves all those theories/conspiracies wrong. No matter what people think, if they do enough research they’ll find that some of the greatest men in history were Freemasons and the world is truly a better place after them. Our Island is a better place because of some

of our brothers, and their kindness didn’t need recognition, good deeds weren’t done for recognition. They were done because it’s the right thing to do, and people deserve a helping hand sometimes.”

Brian Patrick Hall, Junior Warden, Oak Bluffs

## A long line of Masons

“Good men become better when good men from all stations in life and various occupations work together, learn from each other and encourage each other as brothers. My grandfather, his brothers, and my great uncle were Masons. I was a member of DeMolay, the Masonic-sponsored young men’s group, during my adolescent years. The men I knew who were Masons were the kind of men I wanted to be like. I learned a lot of what I know about good leadership, citizenship, and caring for others from my connections in Masonry and my faith community. I joined Masonry as soon as I was old enough, in 1982.”

David Berube, Oak Bluffs