

“Being Free”

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Introduction

An essential qualification of anyone joining the Craft is that he is “free”. But what does this mean?

I presume that it might originally, during the days of operative Masons, have been intended to apply simply to a condition where an apprentice was tied or bonded to a Master Mason (until he qualified) and was not free to work for another.

However the “free” qualification has been applied in Masonic history far more stringently than this intention may have implied. Certainly slaves and serfs have been banned from the Craft with no reference to them having completed an apprenticeship or not, and both could have been apprenticed to a Master Craftsman irrespective of their bonded state.

Conversely there are many trade apprentices in our Lodges today, which is, according to this definition, in contradiction of that original (presumed) meaning of the qualification.

The essence of the meaning of “being free ..” surely is that a person has the right to enter into an agreement or obligation of his own free will.

There are, of course, persons to whom this definition does not apply, or has not applied in an historical context and it is appropriate to examine their rights in this paper.

Defining Slaves, Bondsmen, Serfs and Tenant Farmers

Slavery precedes written history. The earliest known legal code, the ‘Code of Hammurabi’ (about 1760 BC) prescribed death for anyone who helped a slave to escape or who sheltered a fugitive. The Hebrew Bible refers uncritically to slavery as an established institution.¹

Slavery was known in almost every ancient civilization, and society, including Ancient Egypt, Ancient China, Ancient India, Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, the Islamic Caliphate, the Hebrews in Palestine, and the Americas.

“**Slave**” is normally the term used for those who entered this condition involuntarily, by being captured in battle or abducted and/or sold. Their families had the same status. They were capable of earning their freedom (manumission) either by payment, subject to their owner’s consent, or as a gift from their owner.

“**Bondsmen**” usually came into this position voluntarily through inability to pay debt or provide for themselves and families. They pledge themselves as security for a loan usually to buy food or repay debt. Their families also had the same status. They had the right to earn their freedom by payment.

Slaves and bondsmen belonged to another person but “**serfs**” belonged to a property or estate and, if the land was sold or transferred in ownership, the serf stayed with the land. A serf had to work the land for its owner but would normally be given the right to work some land for his/her family on one or more days a week.

¹ Wikipedia

“Tenant farmers” worked land he leased from the owner but were usually required to work one or more days per week on other parcels of the owner’s land. In some countries they could relocate but this may depend on their ‘contract’ so their status as being “free” could have been in some doubt. Slaves, serfs and tenant farmers could be called for military service by their master, which suggests they may not be “free”.

Irrespective of any Masonic restriction, certainly slaves and bondsmen would have had to had permission from their owners before petitioning for Freemasonry. So they probably could not be admitted on the grounds that they may not be free to honour all of the terms of their obligations. The position is not quite clear for serfs or tenant farmers although there is record of serfs being admitted to Lodges in Russia.

Abolition

Perhaps an examination of the terms under which slavery was abolished may shed light on this question.

There were three fundamental steps in the eradication of slavery. They were called:-

- The Transportation Acts – banned importing slaves into a country;
- Slave-trading – banned the buying and selling of slaves already in a country; and
- Abolition – banned the ownership of slaves.

Spain abolished slavery in 1542 becoming the first nation to do so. Slavery on English soil was illegal and that position was confirmed at law in 1772, but slavery remained legal in most of the British Empire. The British parliament passed a Slave-Trade Act in 1807 and an Abolition Act in 1833, which affected colonies, but exempted some colonies until 1843.

Denmark-Norway abolished the slave trade in 1792 and slavery itself in 1848. France abolished slavery in 1792 but Napoleon re-established it until it was banned again in 1848.

In 1790 the abolition of slavery was first raised in the newly formed US Federal Parliament by the ageing Benjamin Franklin on behalf of the Abolitionists and, although slavery had been abolished in several States beginning in Vermont in 1777, the vote failed, partly because of the Constitution wording that implicitly prevented the passing of any laws on this issue until 1808 and partly because of the economic reliance placed by the southern States on slave labour.

However, it was then recognised by many that abolition was inevitable although the Congress Special Committee Report led to a vote that effectively extended slavery for the next 70 years. The whole matter was so controversial that it threatened the whole stability of the Union of States², which had not fully defined the power of the Union over its member States.

It was only in 1926 that a Convention of the League of Nations agreed to “To prevent and suppress the slave trade and to bring about, progressively and as soon as possible, the complete abolition of slavery in all its forms. This finally became the first international protocol on slavery.

In Australia convicts were assigned as servants to the free settlers and were treated as slaves the only difference being that they were not to be flogged by their masters and, except in the

² *“Founding Brothers”* book by Joseph J Ellis, 2001 Random House ISBN 0-375-40544-5

case of a "lifer", they were in bondage for a limited period of years. Governor Arthur stated that an assigned servant:-

"deprived of his liberty, exposed to all the caprices of the family to whose service he may happen to be assigned, subject to the most summary laws...was in no way different from that of a slave."

After two generations nearly 80 per cent of the Australian population was a Convict, Emancipist, or of Convict descent. But many convicts were accepted as being Freemasons although not admitted for initiation.

Masonic Roles in Abolition

No doubt there were Freemasons who owned slaves and fought the anti-slavery movement just as there were many who fought for abolition. In Liverpool, for example, membership of the Merchants' Lodge included owners and investors in slaving vessels like Thomas Golightly, along with others who supported the city's abolitionist MP, William Roscoe.

The Library of the United Grand Lodge of England participated in the centenary of the abolition of slavery by opening an exhibition on the subject. Dr Geoffrey Cubitt's³ article on this exhibition points out – "One section of the exhibition draws attention, for example, to the prominent role of the Duke of Sussex (son of George III and Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England from 1813-1843), first as a pro-slavery opponent of the Slave Importation Restriction Bill in 1806, and then as a supporter of anti-slavery viewpoints in later decades. The same display also highlights another royal freemason, Frederick Duke of Gloucester, whose anti-slavery opinions were reflected in his role as patron of the African Institution. The Masonic involvement of two abolitionists from the north-east of England, James Stanfield and William Hutcheson are also revealed". Freemasons' Hall was used for many meetings organized by anti-slavery organizations but Masonic lodges were debarred from holding political meetings.

On the American side of the Atlantic, Benjamin Franklin is cited as another whose Masonic affiliation was combined, at least in later life, with a vigorous anti-slavery commitment.

How large an issue was Slavery

The Atlantic slave trade brought African slaves to British, Dutch, French, Portuguese and Spanish colonies in the Americas, including the Caribbean. Slaves were brought to the Caribbean from the early 16th century until the end of the 19th century. The majority of slaves were brought to the Caribbean colonies between 1701 and 1810.

As an example of the scale of slavery, the following table lists the number of slaves brought into some of the Caribbean colonies⁴.

| Colony | 1450-1700 | 1701-1810 | 1811-1870 | Slaves imported |
|-------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| British Caribbean | 263,700 | 1,401,300 | - | 1,665,000 |
| Dutch Caribbean | 40,000 | 460,000 | - | 500,000 |
| French Caribbean | 155,800 | 1,348,400 | 96,000 | 1,600,200 |

³ "Squaring the Triangle: Freemasonry and Anti-Slavery" Dr. Geoffrey Cubitt, University of York

⁴ Wikipedia

Slave Rebellions

The slaves were not always passive and violent resistance broke out periodically on the larger Caribbean islands. Many more conspiracies intended to create rebellions were discovered and ended by Europeans before they could materialize. Actual violent uprisings, involving anywhere from dozens to thousands of slaves, were regular events, although such uprisings were brutally crushed by European forces. The following table lists slave rebellions in the Caribbean that resulted in actual violent uprisings:

| Island | Years of slave uprisings |
|---------------|------------------------------------|
| Antigua | Two revolts in 1701 & 1831 |
| Curaçao | Revolt in 1795 |
| Dominica | Five revolts between 1785 & 1814 |
| Guadeloupe | Three revolts in 1656, 1737 & 1789 |
| Jamaica | 13 revolts between 1673 & 1832 |
| Martinique | Four revolts between 1752 & 1833 |
| Monserrat | Revolt in 1776 |
| Domingue | Revolt in 1791 |
| Saint John | Revolt in 1733-34 |
| Saint Kitts | Revolt in 1639 |
| Saint Lucia | Revolt in 1795-96 |
| Saint Vincent | Two revolts in 1769-73 &, 1795-96 |
| Tobago | Four revolts between 1770 & 1807 |
| Trinidad | Revolt in 1837 |

Free-born

It was only in 1847 that the United Grand Lodge of England amended their charges to require that a petitioner for Masonic degrees be a 'free-man' not 'free-born' as previously so that those born in bondage, but now free, could be admitted.

This has an irony in that it now banned a man from joining the Craft if he had been captured into slavery but who had been “born free”.

Indeed, in my own case, I had joined the craft but had later entered into a cadetship with a Government Department to help pay my way through University which obligated me to work with them after graduation for a period of years (subject to a financial compensation). Although I was a Freemason before entering into this bond, if a strict interpretation had been applied to my qualification for continued membership then theoretically I could have been banned from the Craft. (This was brought to my attention by an elder Brother in the Department after one of my rather rapid promotions).

What does it mean today?

To remind a man that he is free is an expression of a principle that we Masons hold dear but to ask a man if he is free carries overtones as it implies that we passively condone slavery and would admit a slave-owner but not his slave.

Many Grand Lodges have abandoned the “free” qualification or never subscribed to it. For instance there is no mention of being free in the membership qualification for the Grand Lodge of Illinois, which is as follows:-

“Membership is open to men of every race, religion, culture, and income level. The basic requirements for membership are as follows:

- *Be age 18 or older;*
- *Have resided in Illinois resident for at least six months (unless specially waived);*
- *Be able to read and write English;*
- *Be of good moral and social character; and*
- *Believe in a Supreme Deity (necessary to take certain oaths, otherwise no obligation would be binding upon you).”*

Conclusion

Whether or not the “Free” qualification to entry to the Craft has been a misapplication of the early intention is not quite the point. Mahatma Ghandi once said 'There is no dishonor in being slaves. There is dishonor in being slave owners'.

Today there are still people living in feudal societies where bonding and tenancies are common and there are still slaves in countries where Freemasonry exists.

The constant arrival of asylum seekers to our shores and the presence of human-trafficking in Australia today should remind us daily of this. About these abominations we, as Freemasons, can do little but are we implicitly condoning serfdom and slavery by explicitly continuing with the historical qualification to be “free”.

So should we not ask ourselves if the “free” qualification is not just an historical anachronism but a constant and obnoxious reminder to those to whom slavery or serfdom are a living family memory.

Should we not seek our own manumission from our attitudes by removing this initiation requirement.