

# SECRET SOCIETIES: FINDING YOUR ANCESTORS IN FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION:

Did your ancestors belong to the Freemasons or Odd Fellows? Resources await researchers through memberships lists, online sources with databases, and through numerous collections of photographs of families who may have belonged to any number of these secret societies.

In addition to the many Fraternal Organizations for men. Many of these groups had female auxiliaries that defined families and grouped likeminded women together like their husbands and brothers .

## TYPES FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS:

When researching these Secret Societies, it is good to take a look at the many different types of organizations that existed both years ago and now as most will fall in the following categories:

- Social (Example: L.O.O.M.)
- Benevolent Service (Example I.O.O.F.)
- Trade/Business (Example:
- Religious (Example: Knights of Columbus)
- Political (Example: Know Nothing Party)
- Criminal (Example: KKK)
- Veteran (Example: P.O.S. of A.)

Checking each of the above types of Fraternal Organization could yield various genealogical information that when applied to your family history will add to their personal stories.

## FREEMASONRY:

*Ancient Free and Accepted Masons VS. Free and Accepted Masons.* Titles of Grand Lodges in the United States vary. The reason for this difference is that in England when Grand Lodges first started, there was a rivalry between two factions of Masons. One faction adopted the title "Ancient" and the other did not which carried over to the United States.

The Freemasons can trace their history back to 1717 in London, England, where it was defined as "a system of morality, veiled in allegory (or a story) and illustrated by symbols. Masonry is a course of moral instruction to teach its lessons.

Today, Freemasonry is defined as "an organized society of men symbolically applying the principles of operative Masonry and architecture to the science and art of character building.

## KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS:

This Fraternal society open to any Catholic males aged eighteen and up. Opposite of that of the Freemasons-as they didn't allow Catholics among their membership. However, Father Michael J. McGivney felt that Catholic men needed a fraternal organization to help with support.

In 1882, he met with a group of likeminded men this Catholic fraternal organization. While they do request that members keep their rituals secret, unlike other fraternal organizations, there is no oath of secrecy in place like the Freemasons.

### **KNIGHTS OF PYTHIAS:**

Founded by Justus H. Rathbone in 1864 in Washington, DC who was a Freemason-which followed very closely the Masonic rituals. This is one of the few organizations that has a "White Male" clause in their constitution-thereby forcing African Americans to form their own group. It served as a benevolent society, and worked hard to support charities that believed in their principals.

### **ODD FELLOWS:**

This organization is another historic group. Like other Masonic organizations, it originated in England as the United Order of Odd Fellow. It is felt that the name stems from their being singled out as a peculiar people, primarily because they shunned some of the practices taking place in England at the time.

Often referred to as the I.O.O.F., they claim to be the first mutual benefit society. For those with ancestors that were members, you will want to keep a look out for a triangle with three chain links, each with a letter in it.

### **INTERNATIONAL ORDER OF WOODSMAN:**

Founded in 1890 in Omaha, NE by Joseph Cullen Root a former Freemason. Root decided to start again with a new group he originally called the Modern Woodmen of the World. He soon dropped the "Modern", and the organization became simply, "Woodmen of the World" The Woodmen took their ritual and secrecy seriously at least through the 1970s. Members were initiated, given an annual password, and the constitution provided for an "Escort, Watchmen and Sentry ". Which still exists today in Fraternal circles.

### **ORDER OF PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY:**

Officially called The Order of Patrons of Husbandry it was also known as "The Grange" that was a Fraternal organization that encouraged families to band together to promote economic and political well being.

The Grange is officially known as the Order of Patrons of Husbandry and was established in 1867. The founder of this organization was Oliver Hudson Kelley who was a Minnesota farmer. Oliver Hudson Kelley was also a Mason, and after having been sent to report on the status of the farms in the southern states after the Civil War, he began to envision a fraternal organization. Unlike other organizations, had it not been for the support, and encouragement from his wife, The Grange, likely would have never been organized.

### **VETERAN FRATERNAL ORGANIZATIONS:**

For genealogists who have veterans in their family there were several Fraternal organizations. Some of these stemmed from the days of the Civil War. The members often referred to themselves as "Brothers" making it Fraternal in nature.

- GAR (Grand Army of the Republic)
- POS of A (Patriotic Order of Sons of America)
- MOLLUS (Order of Loyal Legion of the U.S).
- UCV (United Confederate Veterans)

These records generally contain great information about the veterans and their families: Including

- Name
- Unit/Organization
- Death Date/Dropped from Rolls
- Membership Information
- Burial Location
- Lodge Brothers who joined with the Veteran.

## **LOCATIONS OF FRATERNAL RECORDS:**

Fraternal Organization records can be found at a number of places for Genealogists to examine both online and onsite. Before making searches for records try to determine if the organization still exists today. Some places to search include:

- Historical Societies (State & Local)
- Genealogical Societies
- Public Libraries (Manuscript Collections)
- University Libraries (Special Collections)

## **PHOTOGRAPHIC SOURCES:**

Fraternal groups often will have photographic records as part of their organization. Besides the above listing of sources-the Library of Congress and Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC should be consulted for photographic records.

## **ONLINE GENEALOGICAL DATABASES:**

Online resources for Fraternal Organizations are plentiful. Many online groups include information covering: names, addresses, lodge information, and occupations in some cases. All three of the following Fraternal organizations has membership information found on Ancestry.

*Worldwide Masonic Directory, 1860.*

This database is based on the *Universal Masonic Record and Directory* published by Leon Hyneman in 1860 and contains the names of Masons who submitted their information. Each entry lists the first and last name of the Mason and where he was residing in 1859, when the information was collected. Most of the more than 10,000 entries also list the man's occupation and the name of the lodge to which he belonged.

*Massachusetts Membership Cards, 1733-1990.*

These cards relate to the Freemason organization in Massachusetts. Each card contains last residence information, birth date and location, death date, the lodge an individual belonged to, date of membership, and occupation. Once you determine a local lodge affiliation, it may also be worthwhile to learn where their records are archived. Clues like dates of residency, birth and death dates, and offices held may be included in the lodge's historical records.

*Sons of the American Revolution Membership Applications, 1889-1970*

This database contains applications for membership in the National Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, approved between 1889 and 1970. These applications are arranged in packets.

From the Sons of American Revolution website-their organization publicly states "The SAR is a 'lineage' society. This means that each member has traced their family tree back to a point of having an ancestor who supported the cause of American Independence during the years 1775-1783." For more information beyond the SAR applications online consult with the website at [www.sar.org](http://www.sar.org).

## **ONLINE FRATERNAL COLLECTIONS:**

Outside of databases online another source of Fraternal organizations can be found by searching manuscript databases.

Archive Grid-This database of entries include more than 5 million records of archival materials, not only supplying the name of the repository, but the scope of the collection searched. This can be searched online at <https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid>

Family Search-The genealogy organization of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Formally the Genealogy Society of Utah. Home to millions of genealogy records. Searches can be done online by the name of the organizations at [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org)

Hathi Trust-Collaborative effort of repositories and libraries that have digitized their books, and manuscripts online. Searches can be done online at <https://www.hathitrust.org>

World Cat-The worlds largest library catalog of listings from thousands of libraries located in multiple countries around the world. Searches can be done online: [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org)

### **OTHER ORGANIZATIONS:**

Besides the aforementioned Fraternal organizations a number of other groups can be considered Fraternal in nature. Each has membership information, rituals, and details about their beginnings. These include:

- Loyal Order of the Moose (LOOM)
- Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks
- Fraternal Order of Orioles
- The American Legion

### **FRATERNAL ORGANIZATION DIRECTORY:**

Directories are an excellent place to find information about Fraternal groups and organizations. An excellent online website that breaks down this listing of groups by its abbreviations can be found: [www.exonumia.com/art/society.htm](http://www.exonumia.com/art/society.htm)

This website is divided into 2 page listings. The letter of the Alphabet A-L on one page and M-Z on another web pages is continued.

### **REFERENCE SOURCES:**

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