

FEMALE FREEMASONS?

ACCESSING THE RECORDS OF BENEVOLENT SOCIETIES

Today we immediately recognize the term “fraternal organization” or “Freemasons” with male-oriented social and welfare clubs; and in many cases, we would be right. But nearly all of those organization over the course of history has had a female branch – including Freemasons. By utilizing the records of these organizations, we can ensure we are telling the complete story of our maternal ancestors.

Researching the women in our past can be challenging, but benevolent societies offer us another opportunity. Utilizing the records and ephemera of female specific organizations can be a direct path to understanding their lives in a more comprehensive way.

In 1896, there were more than 3,500,000 individuals involved in at least one fraternal organization, with the Odd Fellows, Freemasons, Knights of Pythias and the Ancient Order of United Workmen topping the list.¹ While the female movement had yet to take hold in the United States at this time, change was very much in the air.

Female Freemasonry

Around 1740, the “Maçonnerie d’Adoption” or “Adopted Masonry” was created to ‘allow the fair sex to take part in charity and philosophy,’ as part of the Grand Lodge of France. In 1774, the “Grand Orient de France” recognized these adopted Lodges, but considered them subordinate to the men’s and they remained under masculine management and direction. Members were largely wives and their primary role was to plan and produce social events – balls, charitable events, etc. During the French Revolution, the Adopted Lodges were reopened and Empress Josephine, wife of Napoleon I, was Grand Master of one of them.

The first female initiated into a male lodge was Maria Dérasâmes, a well-known feminist writer and activist, in 1892. The Lodge was ultimately closed for this act. She later created a Lodge designed for both sexes, which eventually spread to all continents, called

¹ W.S. Harwood. “*Secret Societies in America*,” North American Review, 1896.

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“...the club movement served as a kind of forcing area which propelled [women] into a world of enlarging horizons, new experiences, and new contacts...”

~ Eleanor Flexner

“Century of Struggle”

Droit Humain (DH). It is known in the United States as **Co-Masonry**.

The earliest known involvement of women in Freemasonry in the United States date back to 1778 when, it is believed, the first American Lodge of Adoption was formed in Philadelphia by French officers in the Continental Army. Albert Pike, Supreme Commander of Scottish Rite Freemasonry, create a Rite of Adoption based on the French ritual. Rob Morris, however, was one of the largest influencers of Adoptive Masonry thanks to his ritual under the name, "The Rosary of the Eastern Star," which of course led to the create of the Order of the Eastern Star (OES), which is open to Freemasons and their female relatives.

Do not overlook the time period specific to your ancestor and the social and political movements of the day. The late 19th – early 20th century saw a great deal of social change and as women were seeking to expand their role in society, men were largely looking to diminish it. The nature of these organizations – intentionally male exclusive with heavy emphasis on politics, business and public drinking – were male activities. The threat of women entering their ranks at the social level of their fraternal organization was one which most organizations of the time was simply unwilling to risk. While laws and policies changed across the nation, one institute which could remain segregated was the fraternal order – as a private body, they were under their own rule. It was safe. It would remain male. And thus, for this reason and others, the popularity of these bodies swelled.

While all that remains true, women were aggressively seeking entrance into the lives of the men around them – and that clearly included their fraternal orders. Organizations around the country recognized that one of the best tactics they could take was to create the auxiliary order. The Odd Fellows were the first to attempt to "lessen and ultimately destroy the prejudice felt against the Order by many of the fairer sex,"² with the creation of the Degree of Rebekah. The Order of the Eastern Star (Freemason) and the Degree of Pocahontas (Improved Order of Red Men) were not far behind. The differences between the ladies' degrees and the men were profound.

Resources of these organizations come in numerous variations. It is imperative that when starting a research project based on a fraternal organization that you understand the history, nature, and significance of the organization itself alongside the research you are conducting on your ancestor. Knowing that your Great Grandmother was a member of the P.E.O. Sisterhood, for example, does little to provide details of her life unless you also know what the P.E.O. was all about and why it existed in her community.

Some of the more common organizations include (but are certainly not limited to):

- American Legion Auxiliary (founded 1919)
- Catholic Daughters of the Americas (founded 1903)
- Daughters of the American Revolution (founded 1890)
- National Council of Women of the United States (founded 1888)
- National Women's Party (founded 1913)
- Order of the Eastern Star (founded 1876)
- P.E.O. Sisterhood (founded 1869)

Mixed gender organizations were also available, including the A.M.O.R.C., founded in 1915.

² Donaldson, Paschal. *The Oddfellows' Pocket Textbook*, revised ed. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Moss and Company, 1867.



Good to Know

Many people today are influenced by outside sources on what fraternal organizations actually were, what our ancestors experienced, and what membership meant. Below is a short list of considerations to keep in mind when setting out on your initial research.

First, Hollywood is very good at telling a story, but not necessarily known for their dedication to accuracy. It is worth your time to investigate the organization of interest with as much vigor as you seek out new record collections for your ancestors; give yourself the benefit of research time dedicated to the society to ensure you understand the organization your ancestor was affiliated with. Not just that, be aware of the motivation of the author or producer of the work; by understanding their motivation, you can better understand how much credibility to give to that source.

Many of these organizations come with associated myths or conspiracy theories. In order to avoid these research pitfalls, take your time offline. Utilize newspaper sources, manuscript collections, and published encyclopedias at the local library to get a better base understanding – once you feel you have a healthy grasp on the organization itself, then you can go back to the internet. This will ensure that you see the conspiracies' as soon as they pop up on the screen.

For the most consistent success and best use of your research time, develop a research plan that **focuses on the organization itself** and its activity in the geographical area you are interested in. If you are looking for members of the Eastern Star in Ohio, then refine your search strategy to just that – do not look for generic Eastern Star resources or simply, “societies in Ohio.” The quantity of information available can be overwhelming; it is best to develop a strategy that is very specific and then slowly expand and elaborate from there.

Utilize keywords that are common to the organization to ensure you see it all. A search for the Daughters of Isis, for example, should include the full name of the organization, the parent organization (African American Shriners), a strategy around the Egyptian influence of the role of Isis, whatever it is that makes the organization unique – in this case, some of their rituals and the oath are worthy of that claim – the start date, the most prominent locations, the terminology of their meeting place, known as “Courts,” and their last known membership statistics (12,000 members in 1979).

Resources

1. Internet Archive and Google Books: both organizations have digitized numerous publications from societies (both male and female) from around the country, dating back quite early in American history. To make the most of these sites, again, search for the organization – not your ancestor's name.
2. JSTOR: a digitized library of academic journals, JSTOR is unparalleled in the discovery of the *why* question around your ancestor's organization. Look for articles that give meaning behind the social, political and economic changes and influences across the country as well as locally to gain a broader understanding of the fraternal movement in general. You can utilize this tool at home with a free (limited) account or via your local library or university for more comprehensive access.
3. Local newspapers: by searching for the organization of interest you will almost always find a listing of local organizations; they were just as busy recruiting for members as our organizations are today. Weekly and monthly meetings, special events, picnics, and holiday parties all made the local paper.

4. City Directories: nearly every city directory for major communities across the country included a listing of local organizations and clubs; check the very front pages or the very back for this section.
5. Published Books: as communities everywhere published their centennials, histories, or even brag books, they often included the fraternal societies and a brief history. While you will not find many that feature the women's organizations before the turn of the century, you should be able to develop a timeline and create a hypothesis around when a benevolent or female branch would have been created.
6. FamilySearch Books: includes numerous titles that relate to the history of certain organizations – there are more than 30,000 for the Eastern Star alone. There is an incredible amount of information in these digitized publications.
7. Organizational Directories, Histories, and other Publications: by the 1940s it was increasingly common for the chapter to organize their own directory or similar; you can find these digitized on the above-mentioned sources or from sites like eBay; also look at local antique and used book stores.

<p style="text-align: center;">LODI CHAPTER, No. 137</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Order of the Eastern Star</p> <div style="text-align: center;">  </div> <p style="text-align: center;">Date of Institution, March 26, 1901</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Date of Charter, October 9, 1901</p> <hr style="width: 10%; margin: 10px auto;"/> <p style="text-align: center;">Qualifications for Membership</p> <p>Master Masons in good standing in a Masonic Lodge, their wives, daughters, mothers, sisters, half-sisters, widows and legally adopted daughters who have attained the age of eighteen years.</p> <p>Stated meetings, first and third Tuesday of each month. Fees for degrees, \$5.00 with application. Dues \$2.00, payable annually in advance, November 1st. Election of officers, first meeting in November each year.</p>	<p>Page 11 of the <i>Masonic Directory for Lodi, Ohio</i> describes the qualification's and status for membership of the Lodi Chapter, No. 137, Order of the Eastern Star.</p> <p><i>Masonic Directory for Lodi, Ohio including Harrisville Lodge, No. 137, F. & A.M. and Lodi Chapter, No. 137, O.E.S. 1940 – 1941</i>; FamilySearch.org, accessed 13 Nov 2018.</p> <p>Below, page 14 of the same publication lists officers and their titles:</p> <div style="text-align: center; border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px auto; width: 80%;"> <p>OFFICERS 1940-41</p> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td>Mrs. Mildred Alcorn.....</td><td>Worthy Matron</td></tr> <tr><td>Mr. J. C. Seifert.....</td><td>Worthy Patron</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Ethel March.....</td><td>Associate Matron</td></tr> <tr><td>Mr. Howard Albert.....</td><td>Associate Patron</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Hannah Albert.....</td><td>Secretary</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Esther Seifert.....</td><td>Treasurer</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Goldie Seal.....</td><td>Conductress</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Anna Oswald.....</td><td>Associate Conductress</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Freda Newell.....</td><td>Chaplain</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Charlotte Piercy.....</td><td>Marshal</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Edith Roberts.....</td><td>Organist</td></tr> <tr><td>Miss Marian March.....</td><td>Adah</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Betty Zook.....</td><td>Ruth</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Martha Sommer.....</td><td>Esther</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Lois Scott.....</td><td>Martha</td></tr> <tr><td>Mrs. Jennie Patterson.....</td><td>Electa</td></tr> <tr><td>Miss Mildred DeLong.....</td><td>Warder</td></tr> <tr><td>Mr. Roy Musser.....</td><td>Sentinel</td></tr> </table> </div>	Mrs. Mildred Alcorn.....	Worthy Matron	Mr. J. C. Seifert.....	Worthy Patron	Mrs. Ethel March.....	Associate Matron	Mr. Howard Albert.....	Associate Patron	Mrs. Hannah Albert.....	Secretary	Mrs. Esther Seifert.....	Treasurer	Mrs. Goldie Seal.....	Conductress	Mrs. Anna Oswald.....	Associate Conductress	Mrs. Freda Newell.....	Chaplain	Mrs. Charlotte Piercy.....	Marshal	Mrs. Edith Roberts.....	Organist	Miss Marian March.....	Adah	Mrs. Betty Zook.....	Ruth	Mrs. Martha Sommer.....	Esther	Mrs. Lois Scott.....	Martha	Mrs. Jennie Patterson.....	Electa	Miss Mildred DeLong.....	Warder	Mr. Roy Musser.....	Sentinel
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Bibliography

1. Axelrod, Alan. *The International Encyclopedia of Secret Societies and Fraternal Orders*. Checkmark Books, 1997.
2. Carnes, Mark C. *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America*.
3. Specific to the theme of women's organizations, utilize your local historical society or local publishing company to find essays and historical texts that focus on the region of interest. For example, the "Essays in Colorado History" series published Number 13, 1992, *Women's Clubs of Denver*.
4. Schmidt, Alvin J. *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Institutions: Fraternal Organizations*. Greenwood Press, 1980. (Older, but still relevant.)