

BOOK REVIEW

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American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities

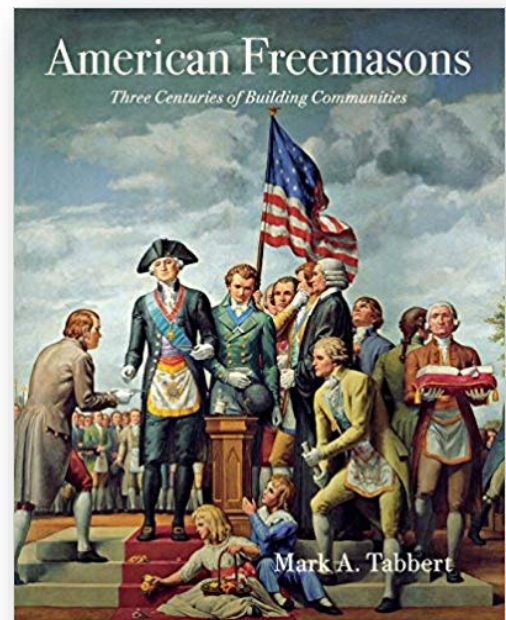
Mark A. Tabbert
NYU Press

Mark A. Tabbert's, ***American Freemasons: Three Centuries of Building Communities***, is a comprehensive survey of the history of American Freemasonry. Attractively presented with a wide array of rich illustrations, ***American Freemasons*** traces the ebb and flow of American Freemasonry from the colonial era to the 21st century. Worshipful Bro. Tabbert has included chapters on the Golden Age of Fraternalism, the appendant bodies and youth organizations.

Bro. Tabbert takes great care to explain the titles, symbols and pageantry of Freemasonry, making this work very accessible to non-Masons as well as Masons. Members who have been Freemasons only a few years will find this book an extremely valuable tool for placing many of our contemporary practices in historic context.

American Freemasons contains a refreshingly honest analysis of the great events affecting the growth and development of Freemasonry in the United States: the anti-Masonic hysteria resulting from the Morgan affair, the interruption of Lodge life caused by the Civil War and the 20th century membership boom and decline. It also includes a penetrating look at mainstream Freemasonry's darkest stain – its troubled relationship with Prince Hall Masonry.

American Freemasons seeks to explore how generations of Freemasons have been exposed to the tenets of Masonic philosophy, and have then practiced those tenets, with varying degrees of success, in the full view of the public. In its earliest American period,



Freemasonry served as a forum for the ideas of liberty and equality. The political and social elite were attracted to its promise of self-improvement.

In each period of American history (at least through the 1960s), Freemasonry adapted itself to meet the challenges of that particular era. Taking on the vestiges of a service organization, a family pastime or a source of entertainment, Freemasonry has offered (or at least attempted to offer) different appearances at different times, while retaining its core values. A central theme of the book is the manner in which Freemasonry became interwoven into the fabric of American communities, many times to the extent that the story of a given community was also, in large measure, the story of Freemasonry.

One of the more intriguing chapters is titled, "*Relieve the Distressed*," which details how Americans in the period following the Civil War looked to Freemasonry for material aid and assistance. This era saw the beginnings of Masonic orphanages, homes for widows and the aged and the massive fundraising campaigns that it took to support such institutions. Much of the current emphasis we place on charity and fund raising comes this point in history. This same time period also saw the rise of other unrelated fraternal organizations (many of which copied Masonic forms and ceremonies) that offered more explicit financial incentives to its members.

American Freemasons makes no predictions about the future of the fraternity in the United States. It does acknowledge the steep decline in membership from the 1960s forward but does not attempt to address or analyze the reasons for the decline.

If your Lodge or study group is looking for a text to use as the basis for an in-depth study of Freemasonry in the United States, ***American Freemasons*** is exactly the book that you should choose for that purpose. Carefully footnoted (some of which make very interesting reading) and adhering to the strictest standards of academic research, ***American Freemasons*** is a valuable addition to the Masonic library of any Lodge or individual Mason.

American Freemasons is available through amazon.com or from other Masonic booksellers.

Bro. Tabbert is the Director of Museum and Library Collections for the George Washington Masonic National Memorial in Alexandria, Virginia. He is a Past Master of Mystic Valley Lodge in Arlington, Massachusetts, a 33rd Degree Scottish Rite Mason (Northern Jurisdiction) and a member of the Society of Blue Friars.

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