

# A Brief History of the Order of the Eastern Star in Kentucky

David E. Jones on the how The Order of the Eastern Star Unfolded in Kentucky

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The Order of the Eastern Star, or OES, is often considered by many to be the “Ladies Auxiliary” of the Masonic Lodge, by others to be some form of female Freemasonry, or regarded as a type of religious organization of a questionable nature because of its emblem, an inverted star. The Eastern Star is actually the largest organization of its type, an international co-fraternal order admitting both women and men. There are over 1 million members, meeting in approximately 9,000 Chapters in 20 countries. Originally open only to Master Masons, their wives, daughters, sisters, mothers and widows, the membership requirements have been expanded to allow ladies with almost any degree of familial relation to a Mason to become members.

While not considered to be a religious organization the ceremonies of the Order have a decidedly Christian theme and it, like the Masonic Lodge, is open to anyone who professes a belief in a supreme being. The ritual of the Order centers around the stories of five biblical heroines from the Old and New Testaments, which correspond to the five primary female relations of a Master Mason, which were mentioned above. Each heroine is symbolically represented as a point on an inverted star which alludes to the “Star of Bethlehem” which pointed down towards the city to guide the “Three Wise Men” to the birthplace of Christ.

The local chapters are presided over by a Worthy Matron and Worthy Patron, although the Worthy Matron is the chapter's chief officer. The local chapters are governed by a state level organization known as a Grand Chapter, which in turn falls under the jurisdiction of an international General Grand Chapter. The order contributes to a variety of charitable causes, both within and outside of Masonic family, all of which are decided on at the state level. The primary charity of the Eastern Star in Kentucky is a retirement home in Louisville, which provides care to destitute members. The Order was found by a Boston-born lawyer, teacher, and author, named Dr. Robert “Rob” Morris. Dr. Morris was initiated into the Masonic Fraternity in 1846 while he was the president of the Mt. Sylvan Academy in Oxford, Mississippi. It was also during this time that he met and married his wife of almost 50 years, Charlotte Mendenhall. It was around this time that Dr. Morris and his wife began discussing ideas for a unique female centered branch of Freemasonry that could involve the entire family. Feminine forms of Masonry began to emerge in France in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Such organizations were generally regarded as clandestine and irregular in British and American Masonic circles as they violated one of the ancient Masonic tenets, men only.

By 1850 Morris was finally able to develop and systematize his ideas into a ritual that he called “The Rosary of the Eastern Star.” He began by initiating local Masons and their wives, hoping to generate interest in the organization. In 1854, he removed himself and family to Fulton County, Kentucky and chartered the first “Constellation” or chapter there, Purity No 1. The following year he organized a “Supreme Constellation” headquartered in New York City with himself as the “Most Enlightened Grand Luminary.” Through this organization he was able to issue charters to

“Constellations” in several states, and by 1860 he had issued over a hundred. Unfortunately, the organization had not become as popular as Morris had hoped. Despite revisions, the ritual remained complex and required a great deal of time, effort and manpower to portray properly. Added to this, Morris's fledgling group was met with open hostility by many Masons and Grand Lodges, who derided it as “Petticoat Masonry,” and who sought to have it banned in many areas. Despite all of this, Morris himself remained very popular and was elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky in 1858. In 1860, Dr. Morris and his family settled in La Grange, Kentucky, when he became a faculty member at the Masonic University located there.

In 1866, following the Civil War, Morris became associated with Robert McCoy, a Masonic publisher and regalia manufacturer in New York, who was intrigued by the “Rosary of the Eastern Star,” and to whom he would ultimately hand control of the organization during his travels in the Holy Land and Europe. By 1867, McCoy had rewritten and simplified the ritual and did away with the system of “Constellations,” instead creating a system of Chapters, Grand Chapters and a Supreme Grand Chapter with himself at the head. These changes coupled with increasing popularity of fraternal groups and orders in the postbellum period, often referred to as the “Golden Age of Fraternalism,” would lead to growth of the Eastern Star into a truly worldwide organization.

However, through the early 1870's there was a growing dissatisfaction with McCoy's leadership, his continued revisions to the ritual and the use of the older Morris rituals by some Chapters lead to “confusion and diversity in the work where there should have been uniformity.” There were even allegations that McCoy's continued revisions of the ritual were more about profits for his publishing business than the good of the Order. This would ultimately lead to several Grand Chapters forming a new national governing body, known as the General Grand Chapter, at a meeting in Indianapolis on November 16, 1876. The General Grand Chapter would appoint a committee to standardize the Ritual of the Order, creating the system that is used up to the present time.

Dr. Morris, who had not been associated with the Order in any meaningful way since the late 1860's, would give his “blessings” to the new General Grand Chapter at its founding and become a “member” under its jurisdiction in 1880. At that time the General Grand Chapter would confer upon him the title “Master Builder of the Order of the Eastern Star,” and set his birthday, August 31<sup>st</sup> as the festival day of the Order. In 1884, Dr. Morris, who was also a well know poet, would be crowned as the second “Poet Laureate of Masonry” following Robert Burns. He would die at his home in La Grange, on July 31, 1888.

A Grand Chapter would not be formed in Kentucky until June 10, 1903, despite having had been the site of first “Constellation.” Dr. Morris's son, Rob Morris Jr., would become the third Worthy Grand Patron of the Grand Chapter of Kentucky, serving during the 1905-1906 year. His granddaughter, Ella Morris Mount would later serve as Worthy Grand Matron of the Grand Chapter from 1936-1937. Kentucky also provided the General Grand Chapter with two Most Worthy Grand Matrons, the highest office to which one can be elected in the Order. The first was Clara Henrich, a member of Dora Chapter No. 2 in Dayton, Kentucky. She would serve the Grand Chapter of Kentucky as Worthy Grand Matron from 1911-1912. She was elected Most Worthy Grand Matron on the General Grand Chapter in 1925. Tragically, in 1927, Mrs. Henrich contracted smallpox while on world tour of Eastern Star Chapters, dying in Shanghai, China at age 54 before completing her three-year term of office. Our second Most Worthy Grand Matron was Josephine Harkins Browning, a member of Adah Chapter No. 24 in Prestonsburg, Kentucky. She served as Worthy Grand Matron of the Grand Chapter in 1942-1943. She was elected Most Worthy Grand

Matron in 1964, completing her term in 1967. In addition to her Eastern Star offices, she was graduate of the Cincinnati College of Music and served as Chairman of the Board of the Bank of Josephine in Prestonsburg. She would later relocate to Henderson, Kentucky, and live to the age of 87, dying in 1980.

There are currently 139 Chapters, with approximately 10,000 members in the Commonwealth of Kentucky. Locally, there have been three Eastern Star Chapters in Madison County. The first was chartered in Berea in 1910, followed a short time later by one in the community of Valley View, and finally Richmond chartered in 1939. Of these three, Richmond Chapter No. 438 is the only one still in existence. Both the Masonic Lodge and the Eastern Star Chapter in Valley View were defunct by 1930, and Berea Chapter surrendered its charter in the early 1990's.

Membership in the Order, along with the Masonic Lodge peaked following World War II. Today, like many churches, civic and other fraternal orders the membership of the Order of the Eastern Star is declining. This decline has mainly been due to the inability of the Order to attract younger members starting in the 1960's. Over the course of the last ten years or so the trend has begun to level out, and it's hoped that by reaching out to their communities using social media and the like, that the Grand Dames of the Eastern Star can carry Rob Morris's vision forward into the Twenty-first century and beyond.

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