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Chapter Officers – An Explanation of their Historical Roles and Origins [Support Material]

These explanations can also be read out as ‘nuggets’ in part or in whole at meetings when time allows.

First Principal



In the Royal Arch there is no single ‘Master’ – the Chapter is ruled jointly by the three Principals who take the lead in all Chapter affairs.

Zerubbabel is the First Principal of the Chapter and is in nominally charge of the proceedings in the Convocation, the name given to a meeting of a Royal Arch Chapter.

The Chapter is the place where those who are fully qualified Master Masons meet to learn about and share the complete or supreme knowledge of ‘The Mason’s Craft’. Three are needed to rule a Chapter because originally the revelation of the great secret of construction was the Principal’s knowledge of how to form a right-angled triangle as the basis for all design and erection.

This needed three participants, each with a rod or sceptre of different dimensions, which, when joined together created the required figure. It is also why the three Principal’s each still have a rod or sceptre.

Zerubbabel was a prince of Judah and governor of Jerusalem, a position to which he was appointed by Cyrus, King of Persia, when he permitted the captive Jews in Babylon to return to Judah. Born in Babylon during the period of their captivity, he was a descendant of King David and a grandson of Jehoiachin, King of Judah, at the time that the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar took them into captivity.

The name means ‘God the Father in the east’ and represents a prince or leader of the Jewish people in exile in Babylon. His sceptre bears a crown which reminds us of God’s omnipotence. He was the one given authority by Cyrus, the Persian ruler, to lead the first group of Jewish people back to Canaan and Jerusalem where the city and temple were to be rebuilt.

His task and responsibility, together with his co-principal’s, is still to appoint suitable people to the work and to reveal to them the full knowledge that we share in a chapter.

Second Principal



Haggai is the Second Principal appointed to rule jointly in the Chapter. He was a prophet, about whom little is known apart from his prophesy that there would be pestilence and drought because of the failure of the people to finish the rebuilding of the Temple.

Haggai declared that God was punishing them for decorating their own house before completing the house of the Lord, and urges Zerubbabel, Governor of Judah, and Joshua, the High Priest, to rally the people to their primary task.

The name, meaning ‘festive’, refers to one of the books of the Bible and represents that of a prophet. That is why his sceptre carries an ‘All seeing eye’ that symbolically represents the omnipresence of the Almighty.

His role after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon was that of scribe, and he acted in that capacity in the first Sanhedrin that was set up after they settled again in Jerusalem.

The Sanhedrin was the Council set up to govern the people of Israel and was composed of six people from each of the 12 tribes. One of those representatives was the prince that presided over the Sanhedrin, and another was the scribe who recorded their decisions. If a deciding vote had to be given then the High Priest was brought in to do so. Thus, all those present as our Principals were needed to conclude essential business



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Third Principal



Joshua is the Third Principal who assists in ruling the chapter. This Joshua is actually Jeshua—not the Joshua of Moses' time. This Joshua was head of the ninth priestly order and a Levite; as such he did not take up arms. The Levites were the religious men charged with doing the Lords work and were really the 13th tribe of the Israelites. He assisted in the reformation of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah.

The name means 'the God who saves' and the role is not only that of a priest, but of a High Priest. It is Joshua, and not his father Josedech, who was the High Priest. That is why the Third Principals sceptre has a 'mitre' at its head. (This is often misunderstood as the words in our ritual say "Joshua, son of Josedech, the High Priest")

Joshua was the High Priest during the rebuilding of the Temple. He was the grandson of Seraiah who was the High Priest when the Temple was destroyed by the forces of the Babylonish General. He reinstituted the correct Temple rituals, without which the older beliefs and practices of Judaism might have been lost forever.

In earlier days, and still in a few English chapters, the Principal in the 3rd chair wore a breastplate that had 12 jewels representing the 12 tribes of Israel, the same as those represented on the ensigns on the floor. The three Principals also used to wear as headgear the items now represented on their sceptres. These are still worn in a few Chapters, but generally in the form of Crowns worn by the Principals.

The mitre and breastplate of the First Principal represent a complete knowledge and awareness of the Almighty who has entrusted to his people, and to us the priests in particular, the sacred knowledge of the Scriptures, prayers and ceremonies that God revealed to Israel. That is why it is usually the First Principal's responsibility to pray and read passages from the Volume of the Sacred Law at our Convocations.

Scribe Ezra



Scribe Ezra is the secretary of the Chapter in the same way as in the Craft. In Scripture, Scribe Ezra, was the leader of the second group of Israelites who returned to Jerusalem. Much of the building of the next Temple had been completed by the time he arrived so that his task was to ensure the restoration of the Law of Moses as that which was taught and followed by those attached to the Temple. That is why in the lectures, Scribe Ezra is described as an 'expounder of the Sacred Law'. The name means 'help'.

Ezra was both a priest and scribe and was a leading figure in the revival of Judaism in the land of Israel after the Babylonian captivity. Ezra, a scholar and teacher, was given official sanction to teach the law, appoint magistrates, offer sacrifices, and beautify the Temple. He was responsible for defining both Temple worship and the canon of scripture for his time. The book of Ezra describes the rebuilding of the Temple, which is reported in detail elsewhere only in the books of Haggai and Zachariah. This story is central to the Royal Arch, you may wish to consult it. There is no reliable record to be found concerning Ezra's death, but it is assumed that he returned to Babylon where he died.



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Scribe Nehemiah



Scribe Nehemiah's role is not a menial task and he is not simply the 'Inner Guard' of the Chapter, but a respected office and is the first officer of the Chapter seen by any candidate as he is admitted.

In Scripture, Nehemiah was a 5th century BC Jewish leader. Nehemiah was the leader of the third group of Jews returning to Jerusalem. In exile he had been the king's cup-bearer, or the one who tested what he might drink before he did so. He held a position of honour in the court of the Persian King Artaxerxes and in 444 BC was appointed by the king to the Governorship of Judea, with authorisation to rebuild Jerusalem.

The rebuilding of Jerusalem and the reforms made during his administration are recounted in the book that bears his name. On his return he was also, like scribe Ezra, appointed an officer of the Sanhedrin and given the role of a scribe.

The name means 'God's consolation' and his task was to superintend the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem so that the Temple and people might be safe from the attacks of those who resented the attitude of the exiles' descendants.

His duty is to assist the scribe Ezra and in most chapters it is further marked by the Scribes' veiling and unveiling of the pedestal rather the Principal's. In any case it is the Scribe's privilege to equip the men who are engaged for the work of clearing the new Temple's ground and then further preparing them for their investiture.

The Treasurer



The Treasurer is responsible for the finances of the chapter. Annually he produces a financial summary report, which is submitted to the auditors, who are elected from within the chapter membership. His role therefore requires sound judgment.

It is the responsibility of each Companion to pay his subscriptions, together with any other charges to the Treasurer promptly.

The Treasurer settles any debts incurred by the Chapter, such as the rent for the building where meetings are held, the various levies imposed by Supreme Grand Chapter or the Province, and any dining expenditure.



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Principal Sojourner



The Sojourners are like Deacons in the Craft. A Sojourner, or 'Journeyman', is one who arrives as a stranger with every intention of moving on in due course. The ritual relates how the three sojourners who arrived to offer their assistance with the rebuilding work proved pivotal in rediscovering the lost secrets, offering the message that those employed on the lowly tasks may attain the highest honours through zeal and industry.

The Principal Sojourner is an officer of the Chapter, but as the name suggests it originally represented someone who came from outside and requested the opportunity to 'sojourn', or spend days, in the company of the companions and assist them in their labours.

At one stage in the 18th century the candidates were called 'the sojourners' and as three candidates were required for the ceremony, as is still the case in some parts of the United States of America, the idea of three sojourners began.

At that time, the obligated candidates once simply listened to a lecture, but as the ceremony developed the need for three Sojourners as officers became evident. In the Chapters held in the Antients' lodges there was the Excellent (or Super Excellent) Master degree that is more popularly known as the 'Ceremony of the Veils'. In that ceremony the Principal Sojourner was known as the Captain of the Third Veil.

After 1834 this ceremony was mostly discontinued and is now only found in the Province of Bristol or in one of the demonstrations that sometimes occurs around the Country.

The role of Principal Sojourner is basically that of the discoverer of the secrets in the vault, but this is always done on behalf of the candidate, so the ancient role of that position is partly retained. The Three Principals also delegate the privilege of closing the chapter the Principal Sojourner.

First Assistant Sojourner



The First Assistant Sojourners traditional task, as hinted by the Principal Sojourner, was to offer services to help reconstruct the Temple in Jerusalem. The three parts of the ceremony of the passing of the veils are each separated by one of three curtains coloured blue, purple and crimson. These colours are still recalled by the colours of the robes of the three Principal's and also the colours of the Royal Arch collars and jewels worn by those promoted to higher rank.

The First Assistant Sojourner was appointed to be in charge of the second or purple curtain and was known as the Captain of the Second Veil. Within the area behind that veil candidates were reminded of the encounter between Moses and the Pharaoh who ruled Egypt, prior to the release of the Hebrews from that land. It may be noted that this Veils ceremony emphasises the idea of release from exile that is still a theme retained in our current practice.

In Scotland it is the custom for the office of First Assistant Sojourner to be the one who is lowered into the vault rather than the Principal Sojourner.



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Second Assistant Sojourner



The Second Assistant Sojourner is sometimes called the junior assistant sojourner. Mention has already been made of why there are three sojourners and of other duties which they performed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and in the ceremony of the veils still practised in Bristol.

In West Yorkshire today there is a chapter that uses the older and much longer opening ritual that involves the questioning by the MEZ of each of the officers as to what are their several duties. The Second Assistant Sojourner gives the answer 'The Captain of the First Veil' and the duty of that office is 'To guard that veil and allow none to pass without giving the word and grip of that veil, and to report the same to the Captain of the Third Veil'.

Such vestiges reminds us of the antiquity of our ceremonies, and the fact that the office of Second Assistant Sojourner, is not just there by chance. Even though the Sojourners may first have been temporary visitors they are now essential parts of the whole Royal Arch ritual.

The Janitor



In the 18th century, when the Royal Arch was often conducted as part of the Craft, it was the same Tyler who kept the outer door for both. So when the Royal Arch was organised separately after 1834, a new title was needed for this role, and they are now referred to as the Janitor.

The name derives from the Roman God, Janus, who had two faces, and who gave his name to January, the month that looks back on the past year and looks forward to the new.

The Janitor guards the outside of the door to the Chapter. It is an elected office that is often carried out by a senior and experienced companion, who also prepares the candidate for exaltation. As in the Craft, the janitor is not necessarily a member of the Chapter he looks after.

Other Offices

All the other offices of a Chapter: the Almoner, Charity Steward, Organist, and Stewards, all fulfil the same functions as their equivalents in a Craft lodge.