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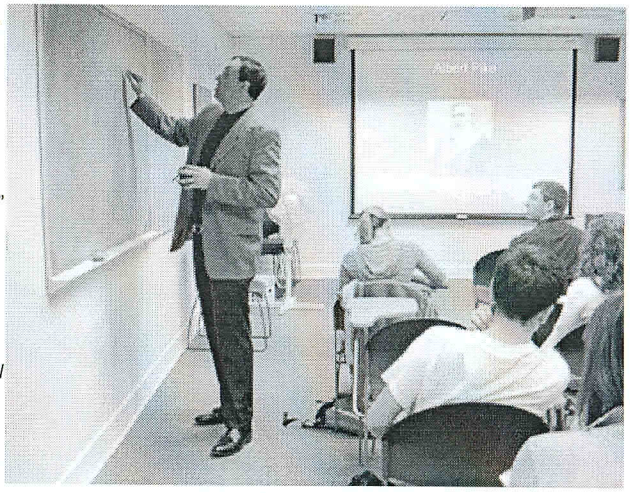
Notes on Teaching "The Craft"

written by José O. Díaz, 32°



It was counterintuitive. On the first day of class, after feeding the bureaucratic beast, I gave my eighteen freshmen students five minutes to tell me all they knew about an alleged secret society to which none of them belonged. After an awkward silence, a few hands went up and terms and phrases commenced to break the ice. "My grandfather was a Freemason," a nursing student told the class, "that's all I know." "Isn't Freemasonry a religion?" a business major rhetorically asked. In those five minutes, we compiled an eclectic list that included random words such as *stonecutters, cult, secrets, charity, Satanism, Christianity, racism*, and *misogyny*. Common phrases borrowed from popular culture such as *National Treasure*, *The Da Vinci Code*, Founding Fathers, and Homer Simpson appeared. Provocative yet not fully formed ideas such as "powerful men," and "emphasis on intelligence" came to the fore. Not a bad start to a ten-week course titled: From *National Treasure* to *The Da Vinci Code*: Freemasons, Fact, and Fiction.

The course, which I designed and taught, is part of a larger initiative. In 2003, then-President Karen Holbrook conceived The Ohio State University Freshman Seminar Program as a vehicle to provide a "unique learning experience for first-year students." The concept was brilliant in its simplicity, small discussion-based seminars aimed at first-year students and centered on current and engaging topics supported by a body of research. Freemasonry, I thought, fits that category. Beginning in the 1970s, professional historians, prodding the margin of social and cultural history, cautiously began to approach Freemasonry. This rapprochement has resulted in a wealth of monographs and scholarly articles possessing unimpeachable academic pedigrees. As I went about looking for ways to teach the Craft, I made two important decisions: first, not to turn this class into a recruiting tool for any Masonic body and second, not to teach "faith-based" Freemasonry that relied on undocumented traditions. The Freemasonry I wanted to teach had to be sustained by current scholarship.

My credentials to teach this course are adequate. Trained as a Civil War historian, I hold a faculty appointment through The Ohio State University's vast and outstanding library system. My duties, in addition to occasional forays into the classroom, reside in the much tamer world of rare books and manuscripts. Freemasonry, however, holds a personal attraction. Years ago, I petitioned and joined a local Masonic Lodge, entered the officer line, and served as Master for one year. Concomitantly, I joined both the Scottish and York Rites. I am, to borrow a phrase from Professor Steven C. Bullock, a cross between a "Masonic antiquarian" and a professional historian. I hold a personal interest in the Craft, but I fully understand the historical profession and its qualms with Masonic history and its practitioners.

With that baggage in mind, I developed a rough syllabus and offered it to the University's School of Arts and Sciences. The course aimed at providing first-year students with an understanding of Freemasonry, the arguments for and against it, and the Craft's role in American popular culture.

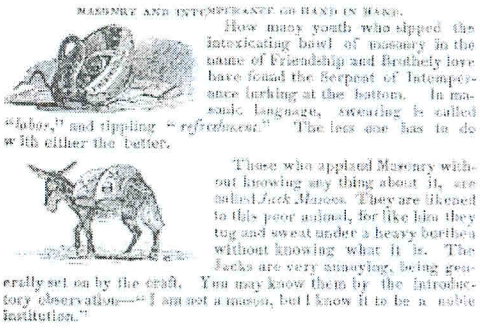
The School of Arts and Sciences accepted the course, capped it at eighteen students, and scheduled it for winter quarter 2008. Within a week, eighteen students had signed up and the waiting list kept growing. It was now up to me to turn Freemasonry from a syllabus into lectures, visuals, and a coherent storyline. To complicate matters, Freemasonry is, in my estimation, the closest a historian gets to an infomercial ("But wait, there's more!"). With the Craft, there is always more to say, more layers to peel. After the vertigo-like symptoms subsided, I decided to use both a chronological as well as a topical approach to my subject. In other words, I would begin the story of Freemasonry with the European Masonic guilds, through the foundation of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717, touch on the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, spend some time in Scotland, France, and the Netherlands, and then quickly move the Craft to America. Once on familiar soil, I could spend good quality time with Freemasonry during the American Revolution, the early Republic, the Morgan affair, the Civil War, the Gilded Age, and finally, deal with its precipitous decline.

This approach offered some advantages. Once students had developed a firmer grasp of the fraternity's history, I felt confident we could switch to a topical approach and interpret controversies and trends in their proper context. Thus, we tackled topics such as Women and Freemasonry, Prince Hall Lodges, Freemasonry and Religion, and Masonic Research.

Teaching Freemasonry at 9:30 in the morning to eighteen bleary-eyed college freshmen presents another didactic challenge: how to grade and review their performance. Nearly twenty years in the academic business led me to conclude that a multiple choice test on working tools, an essay on Albert Pike's *Morals and Dogma*, or a presentation on the Scottish Rite's Lodge of Perfection was not the right idea. Instead, I settled for a less rigorous approach. I personally selected a blend of Masonic and anti-Masonic websites, and each student picked one at random. I asked the students to evaluate their sites and give a short class presentation. This little exercise exposed them to the richness (and pitfalls) of Masonic information on the Internet. It also allowed me the chance to introduce a small dose of information literacy into the course. Internet-based information also contrasted well with the Masonic rare books I introduced later on in the course. Freemasonry—I hope my students grasped—exists beyond the Internet.

Freemasonry and Religion was, perhaps, the most interesting topic we covered. I offered the students my personal interpretation: those who attack Freemasonry on religious grounds are neither deranged nor confused; the "irreconcilable" conflict between religion and the Craft, I argued, centers on narrow scriptural readings. I told my students that I did not blame orthodox Christianity for this rift. Instead, I blame Freemasonry. The Craft, in search of religious validation, adopted pious tendencies it hoped would soothe the more conservative forms of Christianity. For a group nurtured by secular and deistic tendencies, and referred to by historians as the Enlightenment's "First Born," this was a bridge too far. Thus, to borrow a phrase from President Lincoln, "the war came."

With my personal opinion on Freemasonry and Religion out of the way and with some additional details about the legend of Hiram Abiff and the controversial *Morals and Dogma*, I let the students go at it. Unsurprisingly, we reached no conclusion and solved no major conflicts. Most students seemed puzzled over the issue and walked away with more questions than answers. My job was done!


MASONRY AND INTEMPERANCE OR HAND IN HAND.

How many youth who sipped the intoxicating bowl of masonry in the name of Friendship and Brotherly love have found the Serpent of Intemperance lurking at the bottom. In masonic language, swearing is called "labor," and tippling "*refreshment*." The less one has to do with either the better.

Those who applaud Masonry without knowing any thing about it, are called *Jack Masons*. They are likened to this poor animal, for like him they tug and sweat under a heavy burthen without knowing what it is. The Jacks are very annoying, being generally set on by the craft. You may know them by the introductory observation—"I am not a mason, but I know it to be a noble institution."

Photo: An illustration of the "evils" of Freemasonry from the *New-England Anti-Masonic Almanac for the Year of our Lord 1830*, one of the rare books from the OSU libraries used in Prof. José Díaz's winter quarter 2008 course on Freemasonry, From *National Treasure* to *The Da Vinci Code*: Freemasons, Fact, and Fiction.

I concluded the course with a dose of "real" Freemasonry. Through the good auspices of the University Libraries' Rare Books and Manuscripts collections, I devoted an entire class to Masonic rare books and current research. The students not only learned about the Morgan Affair but also felt and read a copy of *New-England anti-Masonic almanac for the year of our lord 1830* and William Stone's *Letters on masonry and anti-masonry, addressed to the Hon. John Quincy Adams* (1832). They studied the origins of Freemasonry and examined *The Antiquities of Free-masonry; comprising illustration of the five grand periods of masonry, from the creation of the world to the dedication of King Solomon's temple* (1823). They delved into conspiracy theories and read portions of John Robison's *Proofs of a conspiracy against all the religions and governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of Free- masons, Illuminati, and reading societies* (1798). Thanks to the generosity of Ill. S. Brent Morris and the Scottish Rite, S.J, my spring-quarter class took home recent copies of the *Scottish Rite Journal* and *Heredom*. Finally, the students and I visited the Grand Lodge of Ohio and its adjacent museum. The trip gave us a chance to see a real Lodge, get a sense of its layout, and see some of the artifacts the museum holds.

Did the students like the class? What did they think about Freemasonry in general? After two quarters of teaching the Craft, it is probably unwise to read too much into students' evaluations. It is prudent, however, to consider their comments. Most students found the class interesting. In fact, some of them told their friends about it. One student described the class as boring. Others were far more generous about the instructor's teaching skills and the materials offered in class. One particular student simply wrote "finally someone has explained to me what Freemasonry really is." Another said "great class."

This was very satisfying, but it simply raised the bar. As the spring quarter approached, the School of Arts and Sciences asked me to teach the course again and to raise the cap to twenty. Once again, the twenty spots filled up quickly. What are we to learn from this brief experience? Freemasonry, in spite of a dwindling membership and the persistent rumors of its demise, continues to hold a certain appeal for many people. In fact, I once asked my students if a history of the Rotarians would have any appeal to them. They just laughed.

It is my personal sense that this crop of students took the course because popular culture prompted them to do it. How close were *National Treasure* and *The Da Vinci Code* to the truth behind the closed door? Were there any secrets and mysteries to be learned? I believe they learned some. They learned that Freemasons do not dabble in witchcraft and cannot turn stones into gold. There is no Baphomet and no secret path to salvation. Sadly, but necessarily, they also discovered that individual Freemasons did not always live up to the Fraternity's lofty ideals. Conversely, the students learned that principles of liberty, individual rights, and civility found eager practitioners among early Freemasons, and that in America and throughout the world, members of the Craft have played positive and negative roles in their nations' histories. In short, they learned that Freemasonry is an entirely human institution. Freemasonry's humanity, I suspect, surprised them most.

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