

## Early Royal Arch & Cryptic Degrees in America



Freemasonry in the United States of America has an unusual early history. Imported from Europe - England, Ireland, Scotland, France, and Germany - it quickly became one of the most important colonial organizations. It remained an exclusive organization through the revolution, and began expanding its membership base into the middle class.

Masonic historians have safely set 1730 as the date of the beginning of American Masonry. Whatever Masonic meetings may have been held before 1730 they were not recorded. Although activity after 1730 rapidly increased and is documented. Traveling British military Lodges spread Masonry through much of North America as they initiated civilians in towns where they were stationed.

### Royal Arch

The first "high degree" to appear in America was the Royal Arch Degree first recorded in December 1753 at Fredericksburg Lodge in Virginia. The degree began to spread through the colonies.

The earliest Chapters were:

- 1758 - Jerusalem Chapter in Philadelphia
- 1769 - St. Andrew's Chapter, Boston
- 1790 - Cyrus Chapter, Newburyport, Mass.
- 1792 - A Chapter in Charleston, SC
- 1793 - Harmony Chapter, Philadelphia

In 1795 the first Grand Chapter was organized in Pennsylvania, and on October 24, 1797 the first national American organization was created in the General Grand Chapter of the New England States, which is today the General Grand Chapter Royal Arch Masons International.

### Cryptic Council

The Degrees of Royal & Select Master seem to have originated as "side degrees" available from itinerant Masonic lecturers. They are known collectively as the Cryptic Degrees, or the Cryptic Rite. The Secret Master Degree was conferred at Charleston, SC, in 1783, and the Royal Master Degree in New York City in 1804.

In 1810 the degrees became permanently associated together with the formation of Columbia Grand Council of Royal & Select Masters in NYC - even though "Grand" is in the name, the body was only local.

The earliest Councils were:

1810 - New York City  
1815 - New Hampshire  
1817 - Massachusetts, Virginia, Vermont  
1818 - Rhode Island, Connecticut

By 1830 there were Grand Councils in 10 states. Under the influence of the well known ritualist Jeremy Ladd Cross's Chart and other monitors, the Select Master's Degree came to be viewed as the culmination of 'American Craft Masonry', even if Councils were found in only a few metropolitan areas and their degrees available to only a few. The General Grand Council of Cryptic Masons International was organized on August 23, 1890 and is the ruling body.

It all started in 1730 and the later growth of the Royal Arch and then eventually Cryptic Degrees was probably what lead to the super structure of the American York Rite system consisting of the Craft Lodge, the Royal Arch Chapter, the Royal & Select Council, and the Knight Templar Commandery.

