

PHELPS MASONS

by Don Tiffany

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The Masonic Fraternity is one of the oldest associations in the world. It traces its origins historically to the College of Artificers established in Rome during the height of the Roman Empire. The "civil engineers" trained there followed the Legions throughout their campaigns in the widespread empire and built forts and camps for the soldiers and, as these camps became permanent homes, they designed and constructed temples, stadiums, aqueducts, and government buildings in these legion camps turned cities – all built of enduring stone.

At the decline of the Roman Empire the Artificer's (stone masons) descendents, who had lived in these settlements and cities for hundreds of years, stayed and carried on their forefathers trade by building the magnificent cathedrals throughout Europe. During this period the journeymen stonemasons formed guilds or lodges to protect their trade and skills. To gain political support from influential dukes, earls and princes, these noblemen were inducted into the mason's lodges and were given the secret signs and passwords that were used by the working masons when traveling from job to job.

By the early eighteenth century there were more speculative (non-practicing stonemasons) members than operative (working stonemasons) members and the modern Masonic Lodge was established in England. The speculative masons gained control and the ritual was formalized and standardized.

Masonry came to America almost as soon as the colonies were established. It came to Phelps with the arrival of the brothers Philetus and John Swift. John settled in the Palmyra area and, of course, Philetus came to Phelps. They formed Mt. Moriah Lodge #112 in Palmyra in 1803 and Phelps Masons met alternately in Phelps and Palmyra. The difficulty in traveling in those early days resulted in the formation of a

Lodge in Phelps. Philetus was responsible for the establishment of Ark Lodge #33 in Geneva in 1807. Later, in 1811 he helped the Masons in Phelps set up Sincerity Lodge #200 of Free & Accepted Masons (F&AM) and installed the new officers, which included his brother-in-law, Wells Whitmore, as the Lodge's first Master.

The new Lodge first met in Luther Root's tavern and later at the home of James Wolvin on Pre-emption Road. In 1820 the Lodge contracted with the East Vienna School District to have a second story added to the new stone schoolhouse being built on Church Street. The Lodge met there until it surrendered its charter in 1835. This building is now the Rectory of St. Francis Catholic Church.

The Morgan Affair, as it was called, started when a man named William Morgan, who moved to Batavia, had threatened to expose the secrets of Freemasonry through the publication of a book that was to be printed in that town in 1826. He somehow wound up in the Canandaigua jail because of an unpaid debt. Several men, one of whom was the Master of the Canandaigua Lodge, managed to steal Morgan away from the jail while the County Sheriff, also a Mason, was looking the other way. Many stories have been told of the disappearance of William Morgan – he was seen later in Canada, his body was found in the Niagara River, he was never found, etc. etc.

The opposition political party used this botched up, backcountry affair to try to discredit DeWitt Clinton, a prominent Mason and popular New York State Governor and to gain power in Albany. The Anti-Masonic party rose to national prominence in 1831 in an attempt to prevent Andrew Jackson, a prominent Mason in Tennessee, from being re-elected President. This party again failed in 1836 in its attempt to prevent the election of Martin VanBuren, also a New York Mason. It held its last national convention that year. It had, however, put the Masonic Fraternity under tremendous pressure and many Masons were publicly reviled. Mothers forbade their daughters to associate with known members

of the fraternity. The furor raised caused many Lodges, especially in Upstate New York, to surrender their charters to Grand Lodge in New York City until the storm subsided, Sincerity Lodge among them.

Notable members of the early Lodge were: Luther & Francis Root, Elias Cost, Leman Hotchkiss, Wells Whitmore, Philetus Swift, Michael Musselman, Isaac & Chauncey Dean, Benjamin Wheat Jr. Ebenezer Redfield, Frederick Vandemark, William Dickinson, Theodore Bannister and James & William Burnett.

Sincerity Lodge #200 was granted a new charter from the Grand Lodge of New York in 1858 and met for a time in the Odd Fellows Hall in the Ross Block. This is the building where Dave Clark, Mike Hoffman and Quigley's Pub are located. After the Gibson Block burned in 1864 and was being rebuilt, the Lodge contracted with the owners and the builder to construct a third floor to be used for their lodge rooms. The members took possession in 1870 and met there for the next 108 years.

The Lodge celebrated the 100th anniversary of its first charter in 1911. This year also brought the heaviest blow to its membership. For years many of the members from neighboring Clifton Springs had petitioned Sincerity Lodge to help them establish a Lodge in their home town but Sincerity Lodge, fearing a massive loss of membership, refused cooperation several times. Several members left in disgust in 1902 and joined Newark Lodge in protest. One of them, William A. Judd, a prominent Clifton Springs businessman and a Past Master of Sincerity Lodge, managed to gain a charter by other means and established Garoga Lodge #300 in Clifton Springs in the fall of 1911. Mr. Judd was its first Master. And as was feared, forty-five members left Sincerity Lodge that year to join Garoga Lodge. Sincerity Lodge survived and both Lodges continued to grow for many years afterward.

The Lodge purchased the second floor of the Gibson Block in 1930. Known as Gibson Hall, it had been used since its construction for most large public events

from political to social. The local residents were entertained there by minstrel shows, traveling theatrical companies and early movies. While the Masons and Eastern Star used it as their dining room the hall was still used by other organizations for their dances, rallies and shows.

The Lodge rooms were sold to Ramon Howard in 1978 and the old dining hall was changed into apartments. The third floor is still undeveloped. Construction was started on the new Lodge Hall on Ontario Street. The new building was dedicated in the fall of 1979 by the laying of the cornerstone by the Grand Master of New York, William R. Punt.

Garoga Lodge #300 in Clifton Springs lost their lodge rooms in 1990 and used the new facilities of Sincerity Lodge #200 until 1999 when events came full circle and the members of both Lodges unanimously voted to merge. The new Garoga-Sincerity Lodge #200 was granted its charter on November 2, 1999. The schism that had occurred in 1911 was removed 88 years later.

The combined Garoga-Sincerity Lodge is one of the most active lodges in the Ontario-Seneca-Yates District and the Lodge building also serves as a home to other Masonic organizations and Royal-Garoga Chapter #425 of the Eastern Star.

William Sergeant is the present Master (2004-5) of the Lodge, which has over 100 members at the time of this writing. It is a busy organization that is active in both state and local charities and civic services.



Gibson Block, Main St. Phelps, NY
1900's

(Photo on file at the museum)