

The Masons

by Kay Holbo

What do Benjamin Franklin, Marc Chagall, Clark Gable, Harry Houdini, Voltaire, Franz Liszt, Douglas MacArthur, Roy Rogers, Buffalo Bill and Harry Truman have in common with John Whiteaker, Sam Friendly, and Eugene Skinner?

Answer: They were all Masons. As were nine signers of the Declaration of Independence, fourteen American presidents, twenty-two governors of Oregon, and many of the early civic, political and business leaders of Eugene and Lane County.

Freemasonry has roots going back to the traditions of medieval stone workers who built cathedrals. The “free” Masons were the specialists, more skilled than common bricklayers or rough hewers of stone. As specialists, they traveled from site to site and gradually formed associations to support them away from home and to guard their skills.

Freemasonry probably began formally in the 1600s as an English gentleman’s club. Masons developed elaborate rituals, and maintained connections with political and business leaders. As a fraternal organization, Masonry attracted an eclectic membership. As a secret society, unwilling to reveal its current members or many of its teachings, it attracted controversy and suspicion.

The first Grand Lodge was chartered in 1717. The first Lodge in the American colonies was established at Boston in 1733, and the first Oregon Lodge at Oregon City in 1846.

Eugene Lodge #11 A.F. & A.M. was begun in 1856, with Eugene Skinner as its first initiate. There were more than twenty members. Meetings took place in a rented room near 4th and Willamette streets. Dues were four dollars per year, payable in quarterly installments.

In 1857, the Masons responded to a request from a local lawyer who wrote that Eugene did not have a community burial ground. “It is well known to you, doubtless, that your respected Fraternity rarely omits to provide, at a very early day, a suitable cemetery for their own use, at least.”

A committee was formed, considerations were made, and eventually ten acres were purchased from homesteader Fielding McMurry. The north

end of McMurry’s property was the site of his home (about where the University of Oregon’s Erb Memorial Union is located today). On the south side of his land claim, he established the first private school in the area, known as the “Point of the Hills.” Nearby he started a brickyard (later operated by his son, James) that provided bricks for the university’s first building in 1876.

McMurry sold ten acres to the Masons for \$336, at 20 percent interest. The Masons platted the cemetery into 500 individual family plots offered to the general public at \$15 each. Records show the price dipped as low as \$6.50 in the next generation.

By 1910, with nearly 500 people buried in the cemetery, a committee was appointed to deal with issues of vandalism and maintenance. They found that no clear record of plot sales and ownership had been kept, and no funds put aside for maintenance. They

believed the best lots had been sold, and many plots that had been sold had not been paid for.

To their credit, the Masons spent \$303 to carefully research and properly enter fifty years of sales, working from county deeds and records. But the issue of adequate maintenance in the cemetery, and how to pay for it, remained unresolved.

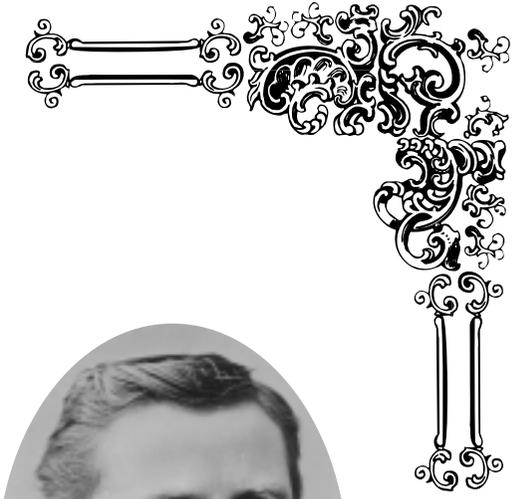
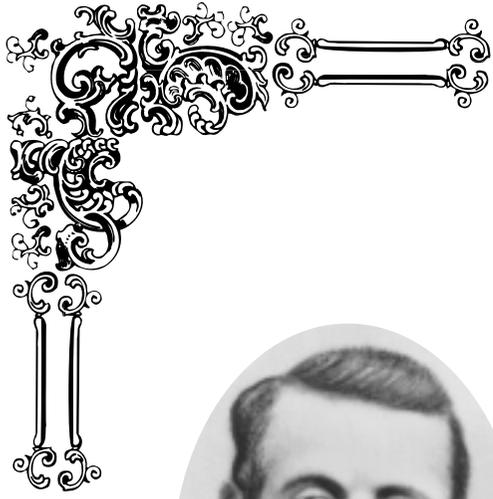
Beyond the cemetery, Masons provided significant services to the citizens of early Eugene. The first bank in the city was not organized until 1882. For a quarter century before that, Masons helped fill the need for banking services by loaning money and providing safe-keeping of funds and valuables.

For early Eugeneans, Lodge membership provided camaraderie and helpful business or political contacts. On a pleasant evening, in good health and with one’s affairs in order, an Oregon pioneer might head for a Masonic meeting anticipating hearty fellowship, some tips about the price of hops or hogs, or the likelihood of a small loan. On a dark night in early Oregon, and with troubles on his mind, a man returning home from a Masonic meeting might reflect that the Masons he had just left would provide some support for his family, should they ever need it.

When he died, a Mason was often accorded a large funeral in the Masonic Cemetery, where the Masonic emblem was placed upon his tombstone. The sheer pervasiveness of these emblems throughout the cemetery shows the important part the organization played in the lives of early Oregon settlers.



Center: McMurry homestead, located where UO student union is today.



L.S. Rogers
1856, 1857, 1861



Martin Blanding
1862, 1870



W.W. Bristow
1866



J.M. Sloan
1880

**Some Worshipful Masters of
Eugene Lodge #11 A.F. & A.M.**



E.O. Potter
1897



B.J. Hawthorne
1891



J.C. Church
1884

