

The Difficult Birth of U.G.L.E.

Durham Lodge No. 66 – December 7, 2011

Most of us are familiar with the United Grand Lodge of England and the significant role it has played in the development of Masonry around the world. Have you ever wondered why is it called the United Grand Lodge of England?

The United Grand Lodge of England (U.G.L.E.) was formed in 1813 after many years of intense negotiations between the Premier Grand Lodge of England (P.G.L.E.) which was originally the Grand Lodge of England and formed in 1717 and the Ancient Grand Lodge of England (A.G.L.E.) which was developed in the early 1750s by Irish Masons. Most of the information for this presentation comes from Chapters 1 and 4 of Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs book, Builders of Empire.

Masonic Lodges had been meeting and practicing their ritual for many decades and probably for centuries, in the British Isles, Europe, etc. However in 1717, you may recall how representatives from 4 Masonic lodges gathered at London's Goose and Gridiron Alehouse to form a grand lodge. The original purpose of organizing was for social reasons. After the formation of a grand lodge many of the Masonic lodges in England wanted to join the new Grand Lodge. To keep some control, the new Grand Lodge required that the Masonic lodges make application to join as member lodges and if approved they were then recognized as "regular lodges" and all of the others were considered "irregular lodges" and their members were considered as "clandestine" and barred from visiting the "regular lodges". The Grand Lodge of Ireland was formed in 1725 and the Grand Lodge of Scotland in 1736.

In the 1740s Ireland was experiencing a population explosion and also an agricultural crisis. This caused a large number of Irishmen, many of whom were Masons, to cross the Irish Sea in search of work. Many of them ended in London, England. These Irish Masons desired to continue their Masonic activity and so formed lodges in London. The Grand Lodge of England did not consider the Irish Lodges as a threat and so ignored them. In 1751, 80 to 100 of the Irish Masons, representing 6 organized Irish Lodges gathered in the Turks Head Tavern in Soho and formed what would later be known as the Ancient Grand Lodge of England (A.G.L.E.).

In 1752 Dermott was elected secretary of A.G.L.E. His term lasted for 20 years and he has been credited with the organization, record keeping and development of regulations for the A.G.L.E. This would serve the Ancients well when later they expanded into the colonies. In 3 years after the organization of the A.G.L.E. it had grown to 36 lodges. The Ancients referred to the Grand Lodge of England as the Moderns and this reference stuck much to their displeasure. Later the Grand Lodge of England named their Grand Lodge the Primer Grand Lodge of England. In 1755 the P.G.L.E. declared the lodges of the Ancients as irregular and dismissed their members as lower class. The schism between the two Grand Lodges grew.

The P.G.L.E. membership came from polite aristocrats and well-educated gentlemen. They attracted gentlemen of the Royal Academy, from highest society and just below nobility and gentry. A.G.L.E. attracted "Men of some Education, and an honest Character but of low Circumstances". It urged members "to treat his inferiors as he would have his superiors deal with him, wisely considering that the Origin of Mankind is the same". The A.G.L.E. was democratic in electing their officers while the P.G.L.E. appointed their officers.

The Ancients then established a regular relationship with the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland and convinced them to communicate only with those of the A.G.L.E. By 1772 a formal arrangement was made among the 3 Grand Lodges of the Ancients, Ireland and Scotland and they then communicated regularly to discuss common issues. This arrangement was very beneficial particularly as Masonry expanded into the colonies. The Ancients embraced the idea of travelling warrants which became popular with the British military. The Ancients In their 60 years issued 108 traveling warrants while the Moderns gave out only 48.

"The Ancients were more successful in the colonies than the Moderns because they were more willing to accept members from across the middling ranks of society and thus more attentive to the needs and lives of a wider range of men". The Ancients elected their Provincial Grand Masters while the Moderns appointed their Provincial Grand Masters from England. The Ancients "had an administration more suitable to overseas expansion". Bullock notes that the Ancients "proved the more popular and adaptable body." "Finally, the Moderns posed absolutely no threat to the Ancients in the relatively young colony of Upper Canada."

After 50 years of rivalry which was very effective in spreading Masonry throughout the British Empire and around the globe both the Ancients and the Moderns now realized that their quarrel should be resolved and were aware of the benefits of uniting. The Moderns knew that the Ancients were more popular and growing faster. The Ancients envied the prestige the Moderns drew from the connection with the Royal Family.

It was a long and delicate process. In 1809 the Moderns changed their mind and appointed a committee called the Lodge of Promulgation which met between 1809 and 1811. The Moderns had now established a relationship with the Grand Lodges of Ireland and Scotland. "The Ancients passed a resolution in support of a union on the condition that the so called "ancient landmarks" of the Craft were preserved." Negotiations dragged on for 2 years and early in 1813 an impasse occurred.

As luck would have it in that year the Duke of Kent became the Grand Master of A.G.L.E. and his brother the Duke of Sussex became the Grand Master of P.G.L.E. The royal brothers then quickly ushered in the union. 21 articles of union were then signed and the United Grand Lodge of England was officially formed on December 27, 1813. The Duke of Kent resigned his position with the A.G.L.E. and the Duke of Sussex became the new Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England.

He took charge of the Ancient and Modern Lodges throughout England and the British Empire. He oversaw significant changes however the most controversial one was the renumbering of the lodges.

A very prominent Masonic mark was made in the short 60 year life span of the Ancient Grand Lodge of England. The Irishmen felt a need for their lodge in London just as the colonist felt a need for entertainment and fellowship in the colonies. The Ancients were responsive and ready to meet the needs of men desiring to be Masons . The Ancients created competition which was most significant in the spread of Masonry around the globe. As you can see the word Ancient has been retained in our name and I can now see where the so-called “ancient landmarks” originated.

The United Grand Lodge of England may not like their acronym U.G.L.E. however it has stuck with them for almost 200 years.

Builders of Empire – Jessica L. Harland-Jacobs

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