

## Two Early Fraternal Organizations

### **Freemasons**

The first fraternal society in the United States was a Freemasonry lodge established in Boston in 1733, founded only seventeen years after the establishment of the British Masonic grand lodge. As was the case in Europe, lodges in America attracted those from the wealthier and higher social ranks in society. Following the Revolutionary War, freemasonry evolved differently in Britain and the United States. During the post-revolutionary period, the American Freemasons counted among their members George Washington, John Hancock, and Paul Revere. Because of these famous people, lodge membership became more popular, spread beyond the east coast cities, and grew to include artisans and skilled workers, not just those in the upper crust of society. The revolutionary era also brought changes in the way that assistance was provided so that state grand lodges formed charity committees in addition to those existing in local lodges. In 1789, the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge set up a fund that depended on sixty-five cents collected from each member per year. Between 1792 and 1809, the Pennsylvania Grand Lodge helped about one hundred members. Still, the local lodges provided most help. Between 1798 and 1800, Masons in Pennsylvania gave out over six thousand dollars to its needy. To demonstrate what impact this aid must have had, it is worth noting that this amount was larger than that given out by any other private charity in Philadelphia at that time.

African Americans were members of the Freemasons as early as 1775 when a British army lodge in Boston accepted free black men. After the Revolutionary War, however, American lodges rejected free African Americans when they tried to join. In response, black Americans formed their own branch of Freemasonry. (See Web site: By the 1840s, black Freemasonry had lodges along the east coast including New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and the District of Columbia. Lodge members tended to be leaders in the black communities rather than common men and this remained true into the twentieth century.

### **Order of Odd Fellows**

Similar to the Masonic lodges, the first mutual aid and beneficial societies in the United States took their inspiration from the friendly societies in Great Britain. Unlike the Masons who were merchants or professionals, the members of friendly societies tended to be laborers and artisans. In addition, unlike the Masonic lodges, where the provision of help to members tended to be informal and secretive, friendly societies had insurance as a primary feature. Like the British societies, the American versions were local, meaning that the societies were made up of only one lodge. National beneficial societies did not appear before 1820. The Independent Order of Odd Fellows, founded by an immigrant in Baltimore in 1819, was the first

national insurance society in the United States. It received its charter from Manchester Unity of Odd Fellows in England. Only eleven years later, there were Odd Fellows lodges in four states with over six thousand members. In 1843, the Americans separated from the British. Odd Fellows differed from the Freemasons in that their members were mostly average workers and they established help as a right and a benefit for all members rather than regarding it as charity.

**Sources:**

MasterMason.info <http://www.4masonry.com/default.htm>

Original Charter, Most Ancient and Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons, 1784,  
<http://www.mwphglil.com/Prince%20Hall%20Original%20Charter.htm>