



Beyond the Square & Compass: How Ship Captains and Freemasonry intertwined in the 18th and 19th Centuries.

How did Freemasonry come to America in the 18th century? More specifically, how did the warrants of constitution for the newly created lodges travel from Europe to the shores of the Americas? There was no other choice, they traveled by sailing ships, the same way everything else arrived in the New World. It's no coincidence that all the newly constituted Lodges in the Americas were in port cities or near navel garrisons. Lodges were established from Newfoundland to the Caribbean throughout the 18th and 19th Century.

Although Brother Henry Price is generally credited with establishing organized Freemasonry in America by having the first authorized Provincial Grand Lodge in Boston on July 30, 1733, published records show Brother Benjamin Franklin established lodges in Pennsylvania in 1730. Brother Franklin made his first voyage from Europe to America in July of 1726 when he was 20 years old. He did not return to Europe until 30 years later in 1757. So how did the first Warrants of Constitution arrive in America?

As a Freemason, you know very well the importance of a Lodge's Warrant. In the 18th Century, a Warrant conferred legitimacy and linked a colonial Lodge directly to its European authority. Most warrants crossed the Atlantic aboard merchant vessels, not naval ships. Brethren often entrusted these documents to reliable ship captains. In many cases, the captains themselves were Freemasons. In addition to a trusted Ship Captain with transporting a Lodge's Warrant, another common method was personal carriage. A Brother emigrating by ship to the colonies would be entrusted with the warrant. This method was preferred when the lodge was being formed by men already known to the Grand Lodge or the document needed protection from loss or interception. These Brethren sometimes risked everything to deliver a Warrant, because without that document, a lodge did not legally exist.

What was the attraction of Freemasonry to Ship Captains? Generally, Captains were highly educated by the standards of their day. Navigation required mathematics, astronomy, and constant self-discipline. Masonry provided a sense of identity beyond nationality and a shared language of symbols tied to order, geometry, and reason. A ship Captain who lacked these traits was more dangerous than a raging storm. Masonry also offered Captains mutual aid in foreign

ports and protection during imprisonment or shipwrecks. While months at sea could isolate men from home and country, Freemasonry offered continuity, safety and fraternity.

As Freemasons, we are taught that the working tools are drawn from operative crafts but practiced speculatively to teach us moral and practical lessons. Sailing a ship in the 18th Century required the same qualities: precision, discipline, restraint, and judgment. It is therefore natural that the working tools of the Craft can be applied to the captain of a ship.

The square is used to test angles and ensure that work is true. At sea, the square relates to correct bearings and angles. Navigation depended on ensuring the ship is “true” to its course. A ship out of square with the wind or current will drift and never make its destination. Just as a ship must be kept on a true heading, we as Masons are taught to act upon the square and to make decisions that are just and balanced, even when unseen forces push us off course.

The compass defines boundaries and arcs. At sea, the compass is imperative to navigation which could determine life or death. The helmsman must keep the ship within safe limits with misapplied correction becoming as dangerous as inattention. Just as the compass teaches us to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds, the captain must limit speed, sail, and risk according to conditions.

The level represents equality among our fellow man. The sea treats all men equally no matter rank or birth. A ship’s stability depended on keeping the ship’s crew level and balanced. The level reminds us that all men meet upon the same plane, and that leadership or rank does not remove one from accountability.

The plumb is a symbol of moral uprightness, integrity, and justice, representing the need to live an honest and principled life. An upright mast is essential to safe sailing. A captain who lacks moral integrity endangers everyone aboard, just as a leaning mast will imperil the ship.

The 24-Inch gauge represents the hours of the day and urges a Brother to divide their time intentionally rather than wasting it. A seaman’s day is divided into watches. Generally, 4 hours on and 8 hours off. This ensures ample time for work, rest, nourishment, and reflection. Just as time is strictly measured at sea, rations and water were also carefully measured.

Mismanagement could mean starvation or disaster.

The Common Gavel commands authority and order. Just as a Lodge’s Master utilizes the gavel to rule his Lodge, a Ship’s Captain must maintain order and discipline aboard his ship. The gavel also symbolizes the removal of vices and excesses that threaten harmony, whether in Lodge or aboard a Ship. A disorderly crew is as dangerous as a strong gale.

The “G” in Freemasonry represents God or Geometry. Both are the foundation for Masonry and navigation. Celestial navigation relies on the correct application of geometry to the stars above.

Upon the uncharted sea of the 18th Century, geometry turned chaos into enlightenment. It is almost certain that in times of danger or distress, Ship Captains placed their trust in God.

Without the foundation of Freemasonry to guide the Ship Captains of the 18th Century, it is unknown if Masonry would have established itself among the early colonists. Freemasonry in early America was instrumental in the formation and leadership of our Nation.

Some interesting facts related to Freemasonry and 18th century sailing vessels.

At least 2 merchant vessels operating off the US Eastern seaboard between 1737 and 1779 had Masonic names. They were the *Freemason* and the *Master Mason*. The brigantine *Freemason* is recorded on voyage in late 1772 while in *Shipwrecks North of Boston: Vol. 1 Salem Bay* a note is made of the brigantine *Freemason* encountering a storm, killing 10 (1773) and then famously exploding at anchor in Marblehead, MA in 1779. The fate of the *Master Mason* is unknown. There was also a British vessel, likely carrying cargo in the 19th Century, owned by Captain William Dove that was named the *Masonic*. The vessel perished with its Captain in 1893. There also is something of a masonic mystery, the *USS Baron DeKalb*, a City class ironclad with the Union Navy. There is no record of why the civil war vessel would display the masonic square and compasses, although it is known that DeKalb had been a freemason, as was the ship's fifth and final captain, Lt. Commander (later Admiral) John Grimes Walker.

There are 3 documented Navel Lodges warranted by the Grand Lodge of England:

HMS Vanguard (1760): Later moved to London.

The *Ship Prince* (1762): Operated out of Plymouth.

The *Guadeloupe* (1764): Hosted a Lodge that later moved to Somerset House.