

A Return to Masonic Roots: Benjamin Franklin Lodge No. 83, F. & A.M. of Wisconsin

By Bro. Robert C. Blackburn

On June 1, 2007, at the 163rd Annual Communication of the Grand Lodge of Wisconsin, F. & A.M., Grand Master Rodney Paulsen presented a new charter to Benjamin Franklin Lodge No. 83, located in Madison. Lodge No. 83, originally known as “Concordia,” had been dark since 1882. The restored lodge represents an experiment in Wisconsin Masonry. Like its predecessor, Concordia, Benjamin Franklin uses an alternate ritual. The lodge’s format is also different from other Wisconsin lodges. Benjamin Franklin models itself on European Masonry, placing greater emphasis on Masonic tradition and education in its work.

The members of Benjamin Franklin No. 83 did not set out to create a new lodge. Many were, and remain, officers in other area lodges. Instead, the lodge grew from an informal dinner and discussion club. In late 2005, a few brothers from Commonwealth No. 325, another Madison-area lodge, began meeting for dinner at a private club. Attendees enjoyed drinks, a formal meal, and a Masonic presentation given by one of their group. Soon, other area Masons were being drawn to these gatherings, particularly from Middleton-Ionic No. 180. All agreed that something special was occurring on these nights, something that was lacking at their individual lodges. In early 2006, the group adopted the name “The Leather Apron Club,” after a similar club founded by Bro. Benjamin Franklin in 1727. Thereafter, all meetings began with a reading of the club’s charge, which governed attendee conduct, followed by an opening prayer.

The Leather Apron Club continued to grow. As it did so, it became apparent that the L.A.C. contained the nucleus for a new lodge. No one, however, was particularly interested in taking this step. Members already had their individual lodges, as well as Silas H. Shepherd No. 1843, Wisconsin’s research lodge. If the L.A.C. were to become a lodge in its own right, it would have to offer something unique in Wisconsin Masonry. Several Grand Lodge officers, who recognized this potential, encouraged the L.A.C. to give the matter further thought. After much discussion and debate, the members of the L.A.C. agreed.

A plan was approved in June 2006 to transform the L.A.C. into a limited membership, “European-style” lodge. This lodge would require formal attire, strict attendance at meetings, and a continued emphasis on Masonic education. It would also not be tied to a Masonic building. Though Madison has a beautiful Masonic temple, the proposed lodge would remain at the same private club, renting its space as needed. Lastly, and more controversially, it was agreed that the lodge would only be formed if it could work in the Emulation Ritual. This is the ritual promulgated by the Grand Lodge of England and it is very different from the ritual ordinarily used in Wisconsin.

The members of the L.A.C. were skeptical of their plan’s success. Its choice of meeting place, being a private club, was problematic. Modern Grand Lodge rules generally

prohibit lodges from convening where alcohol is served and the private club in which they had been meeting has not one, but two bars and multiple dining rooms. Further, only one lodge in Wisconsin, Aurora No. 30, had at that time permission to use an alternate ritual. Aurora No. 30, organized in 1850, works in the German Schroeder Ritual. To do something similar, the L.A.C. proposed resurrecting another German lodge, Concordia No. 83. Like Aurora No. 30, Concordia No. 83 never worked in the Wisconsin Ritual. It was hoped by the L.A.C., therefore, that the new lodge could exchange Concordia's earlier "French" ritual with England's Emulation Ritual.

On October 25, 2006, Grand Master Rodney Paulsen, accompanied by several other Grand Lodge officers, attended a regular meeting of the L.A.C. Grand Master Paulsen was very impressed by the L.A.C.'s work and its spirit of Masonic fellowship. The L.A.C. took this opportunity to present Grand Master Paulsen with its petition to form a lodge. The new lodge's name would be Benjamin Franklin, rather than Concordia, in honor of the L.A.C.'s symbolic patron. Everyone present knew that the petition was a big request. Nevertheless, Benjamin Franklin No. 83 received its dispensation four days later.

Benjamin Franklin No. 83 is very aware of the opportunity, honor, and trust it has received from its Grand Lodge. While giving a nod to Concordia's German heritage, the lodge works diligently with a proctor from England to perfect its ritual. Indeed, Benjamin Franklin No. 83 has already initiated three new Masons, passed two of these, and looks forward to bringing several more petitioners to light as part of its 2008 degree work. But more importantly, the lodge remains focused on Masonic education and fellowship. It is Benjamin Franklin No. 83's belief that every lodge should be a "research" lodge. The second meeting of every month, known as "brother night," is specifically reserved for this purpose. The meeting is not tiled and Non-Masons interested in the Fraternity are invited to attend. As with the L.A.C. before it, participants enjoy a formal dinner and presentation, though sometimes the lodge arranges guest speakers or musical performers.

It is, perhaps, misleading to call Benjamin Franklin No. 83 a "new" lodge. Neither its revived charter nor its philosophy is new at all. Indeed, the current talk in Masonry about "Masonic restoration," "traditional observance," or "European-style" lodges similarly misses the point. Masonic history shows us what successful lodges look like, how they are grounded in education and fellowship, and what they can enjoy and accomplish. It is not necessary to rehash, repackage, or reinterpret this information. Masonry has a sure foundation. It just has to be lived. And that is the real idea that motivates and inspires Benjamin Franklin No. 83.