

Masonic Temple: Jewel of the Capital City

By **LANCE ARMSTRONG**
Sacramento Union Writer

Downtown Sacramento's J Street is alive with history, as a variety of the street's historic buildings capture the memories of bygone eras. And among the street's grandest historic structures is the Masonic Temple at the northwest corner of 12th and J streets.

The presence of this large, three-story, brick, architectural jewel of the city has attracted the attention of residents and visitors of this section of downtown's business district for many decades.

Adding to the aesthetics of this historic structure is a pair of large sentries, which flank the entrance of the temple near the southwest corner of the building, along J Street.

Other features include images of 13 cherubs riding upon fish and animals, several lion heads and other terra cotta work, as well as bricks, which were created at the historic Gladding, McBean and Co. in nearby Lincoln.

As one of the largest buildings of the area, the Masonic Temple has served as the home of local Masonic lodges since 1920. During this time, a variety of local businesses have

come and gone from the building's street-level business spaces, which line both 12th and J streets.

Although this storied structure will turn 88 years old this year, Freemasonry is much older, both in and outside of Sacramento.

Depending upon the source, Freemasonry is generally said to date back sometime from the building of Solomon's Temple to the mid-1600s.

The original Masons consisted of architects and builders, who vowed to protect their crafts, artistry and themselves through a fraternity that invented signs and symbols known only to its members.

A late 19th century history, entitled, "Fifty Years of Freemasonry in California," states that the history of Freemasonry is similar in character to that of the history of a nation.

A section of these writings explains that Freemasonry has its historic and prehistoric eras and that its oldest roots were actually born in the "early dawn of creation, when the supreme grand architect of the universe commanded, 'Let there be light.'"

The history also describes Freemasonry as having science as its father and religion



The Masonic Temple at 12th and J streets has been home to local Freemasons since its dedication on May 15, 1920. (Sacramento Union Photo/Lance Armstrong)

as its mother. Despite this reference to religion, Freemasons are only required to have a belief in a higher power – not any particular religion – while dedicating themselves to friendship, love and association with others.

According to Sacramento Masonic Lodge No. 40, Freemasonry is "an organization of men believing in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, using the builder's tools as symbols to teach basic moral truths, thereby impressing upon the minds of its members the cardinal virtues of brotherly love, relief and truth, which

they should apply to everyday activities."

It is through this approach that Masons have gained their strong reputation for providing a wide variety of charitable services to those living in and outside their communities.

Local Masons, for example, currently assist in the identification and recovery of missing children through their Masonic Child Identification Program. This program provides a kit for fingerprinting, physical identification, a dental imprint, a video of a child and a DNA sample.

Furthermore, early Sacramento Masons

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A neon sign advertises for the temple above the building's entrance. (Sacramento Union Photo/Lance Armstrong)



Past masters of Washington Lodge No. 20 gather for a photograph on March 31, 1938. (Photo courtesy of the Masonic Temple Association)

provided free-of-charge burials, including the cost of wooden coffins, and along with local Odd Fellow members, founded the city's first public hospital.

Freemasonry, which established its first lodge in the world in England in 1717, its first North American lodge in Boston in 1733, its first California lodge in San Francisco in 1849 and its Grand Lodge of California in San Francisco in 1850, has built a long history in Sacramento.

Although the Masonic Temple on J Street is cherished as one the capital city's premier, historic, architectural treasures, the story of the Masons' existence in Sacramento is much older than this building. Masonic



James Buchanan Giffen, shown in this 1898 photograph, was one of the early masters of Sacramento Lodge No. 40. (Photo courtesy of Sacramento Public Library, Sacramento Room)

history in Sacramento, in fact, is about as old as the city itself.

The first Masonic lodge in Sacramento was Tehama Lodge No. 3, which was established as Connecticut Lodge No. 73 on Jan. 8, 1850.

This lodge sprang forth from a gathering of about 100 Masons held in September 1849 in McNulty's unfinished building on the north side of K Street, between 5th and 6th streets.

It was there that plans were arranged to organize a relief association for "sick and distressed brothers, who were constantly arriving from across the plains." But these plans eventually dissolved after it was learned shortly after the meeting that local resident Caleb Fenner possessed a charter from the Grand Lodge of Connecticut.

Through Fenner, Sacramento received its first Masonic Lodge, which was renamed Tehama Lodge No. 3 on May 8, 1850.

The local lodge met in the attic of the Red House on the southwest corner of 5th and J streets, but relocated to the Market House on M Street, near 2nd Street, due to an incident when the building was said to be used for "immoral purposes."

Local Masons once again relocated in 1853 to the second floor of the Stanford Building at 2nd and K streets.

It was also in this year that Sacramento Lodge No. 40 was established. The lodge met at the Masonic meeting place at 2nd and K streets until the early 1854 completion of Bennett's three-story building at 17-19 J St. (later 117 J St.). Local Masonic lodges gathered on the third floor of this building.

Alongside Bennett's building, which included the Metropolitan Baths, was the

Sacramento Daily Union building at 121 J St.

By 1855, the presence of fraternal organizations in Sacramento had grown to four Masonic lodges, four Odd Fellows lodges, one Division of the Sons Temperance, two Temples of Honor, as well as a few auxiliary lodges.

The strength of the local Masons continued to grow throughout the years, resulting in five Masonic lodges, one chapter of Royal Arch Masons, two chapters of the Order of the Eastern Star, one council of Royal and Select Masters and one commandery of Knights Templar by the 1890s. Masons at this time met at a large, three-story temple, which was constructed in 1865 on the north side of K Street, about 100 feet west of 6th Street.

The local Masons continued their maturation in the capital city, eventually resulting in their plans to erect the present-day temple at 12th and J streets.

A special day in Sacramento Mason history occurred when the cornerstone for this temple was placed during a well-attended ceremony held on Sept. 7, 1918. The event also included a parade.

The completion of the elaborate, three-story temple, which was constructed at a cost of \$350,000, was celebrated with its official dedication, led by Masons of California Grand Master Charles Albert Adams on the evening of May 15, 1920.

The program, which concluded with dancing in both the temple's auditorium and Eastern Star Hall, also presented the public with the opportunity to tour the entire temple.

A tour of the new temple began with the street level foyer, which includes a staircase, elevator, tile work and a large terra cotta urn created at Gladding, McBean and Co.

The building's second floor includes four lodge rooms, the large and small Blue

Rooms, the Royal Arch Masons' Red Room and the Order of the Eastern Star (OES) Room. OES members, however, no longer meet in this room or building.

The third floor consists of the ballroom, the billiards room, the lounge room, the library and the balcony.

The building also has two mezzanines, the first being on the second floor and including an office, kitchen, dining room and storage rooms. The second mezzanine is on the third floor and features a balcony overlooking the auditorium and a kitchen.

Along with the opening of their new temple, local Masons have enjoyed continued success in the capital city, which has been marked by anniversary celebrations of 50, 100 and 150 years of Freemasonry in Sacramento.

Today, downtown Sacramento's Masonic Temple is home to about 1,500 local Masons of Tehama Lodge No. 3, Sacramento Lodge No. 40, Washington Lodge No. 20, Union Kit Carson Lodge No. 58 and Concord Lodge No. 117.

In addition to these lodges, three local York Rite bodies and the International Order of Job's Daughters' Bethel No. 4 also meet in the building.

Despite decreasing membership numbers in recent years, the future of local Masons remains promising.

The temple's manager, Kenneth McIver, said that he has been pleased to see some new faces at the temple lately.

"I am starting to see heads turn up that are not gray," McIver said. "It's nice to see younger people taking an interest in (Freemasonry)."

As the local Masons continue into the 21st century, their sturdy, well-built temple stands as a testament to the strength and unity of the brothers of Sacramento's historic Masonic lodges.

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