

A Brief History of the Red Cross of Constantine

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The essay briefly examines the history of our Order - first by examining the historical/mythical basis of the Order, then the origins of Masonic Order of the Red Cross of Constantine, and finally by examining some aspects of the Order as we know it today.

Part 1 – Who was Constantine?

As you all know, the Legend provided in our Grade of Reception concerns a vision of Emperor Constantine I prior to a momentous battle, which gave him undisputed rule over the entire Roman Empire. Imagine my surprise when I received a sign of my own preparing for this oration, which I had struggled with for some time. Thus, it was on my birthday no less, that I received my daily email from *Encyclopedia Britannica* outlining important happenings on the date. At the top of the list, was the death of Constantine in 337AD. In addition, although Constantine had been a Christian convert for many years, he had never been baptized, and so it was that it was perform on this same day on his deathbed. Attached to the email was a link to a lengthy article on Constantine I, surely sent to me as a basis for this short oration today. So as Constantine, having a vision of his sign, exclaimed, “In this sign I shall conquer”, I found myself exclaiming, “In this sign, I shall write!”

In reading the details of Constantine's life, I came to understand that our Order misses entirely perhaps its most important lesson. Rather, than our watchwords being Faith, Unity, and Zeal, we should have, but one - Constancy - an attribute, to which Constantine's name alludes.

As historians have noted, his use of the signs and symbols of Christianity to win a battle was not viewed as particularly astounding to the men of the time. Such was the practice of most generals. Their loyalty, however, to the God or gods, as the case maybe, after winning such a battle was later largely forgotten. This is perhaps a legacy of a polytheistic worldview, in which, a particular god or goddess is called upon for an issue most germane to their domain and then ignored in favor of a different deity, serving a new purpose.

Constantine, like many historical figures used in Masonic allegory is greatly romanticized by the writers of our ritual. However, whatever else Constantine was, he was a true convert. Throughout the rest of his life he used his office to secure Christianity's place in history by making Christianity the religion of choice for the upper classes and by lavish support to build the infrastructure of the emerging church. To accomplish this as Emperor of a largely pagan Empire was no easy task, for the Empire valued tradition far more than change and progress. Part of his success rested on a brilliant fusion of the best of the classical pagan world's culture with that of Christian precepts.

It was also very difficult for Constantine to bridge the gap between the requirements of securing and defending his title of Emperor with being a Christian. Constantine wasn't an intellectual convert; his was a conversion of the heart. His involvement in various Christian controversies and heresies of the period suggested that he saw the necessity for unity, over all else, and he found the finer points of theology tedious.

This lack of religious intellectualism perhaps prevented him from over analyzing the obvious conflicts for his rule which involved much bloodshed and acts of cruelty. Where some men would select one path or the other, mystic or warrior, Constantine somehow found a middle way. Because of this we have the Christian culture we have today.

Constancy then would be a good precept to take into our hearts as Knights Companions, but it is a difficult virtue to uphold. We see with some distress that many men join the Fraternity only to drop out a few years later. Indeed, in our modern society, constancy in our various affiliations whether professional, religious, or Masonic seem to be largely a thing of the past for all but a few.

Most of us are invited to the Order because we have demonstrated constancy in our Masonic work. Indeed, only a mistake would admit a Companion who has not. We are men who take our obligations seriously and persevere in hard times. We are also men who understand, as Constantine undoubtedly did, the fine line leadership walks between necessity and desire.

Our own work hardly mirrors Constantine's in scope, of course, but it provides an excellent encouragement when our own pursuits fall short of our expectations. We have, in addition, something Constantine likely did not. It is that wholly Masonic attribute of Brotherly Love. In our Society, our fellow Knight Companions bring us the comfort of shared experience and support in our time of need.

So when asked what value yet another Masonic organization brings, tell them this:

It recognizes and rewards and, yes, provides a refuge of sorts, for those demonstrating many years of *Constancy* in the service of Freemasonry.

Part 2 – How did the Masonic Order of the Red Cross of Constantine come about?

Let me say from the onset that the creation of the Masonic Order of the Red Cross of Constantine has an extremely complicate history, which I am merely paraphrasing here. I have borrowed shamelessly for this address from various sources which I will mention in due time, and which the interested Knight Companion should consult for a fuller understanding of the Order.

Freemasonry's allegories tend to make characters wholly good or whole bad, but at least for those taken from real life, this is never true. We certainly have seen this in the life of Constantine whose character was most definitely grey, rather than purely black or white. For 19th century English Freemasons, however, Constantine was a perfect exemplar, and an order build around him and an embellished legend of his role in the early church proved irresistible. In part, this was due to Freemasonry's increasing popularity, which had created a ready-made interest in new organizations and rituals under the Masonic umbrella. Although the core Masonic system expounded in the Lodge degrees had removed Christian symbolism beginning with the Anderson Constitutions, there continued to be an interest in Masonic organizations that required a Christian belief to gain admittance and used Christian themes and symbolism in their ritual.

We owe the creation of the Red Cross of Constantine to a quirkily Mason name Robert Wentworth Little. A full biographical sketch of Little is beyond the scope of this short introduction, but those interested in a detailed account of Little's life should consult a recent paper entitled "Robert Wentworth Little: A Duplicitous Freemason, Wordsmith and Mystic," by Bro. Richard Gan, Susan Snell, and Bro. David Peabody, which appeared in two parts in volume 130 and 131 of the Proceedings of *Quator Coronati* (also available as a PDF download). As one might suppose from the title, Little was also a grey character. However, he was responsible for the creation of two enduring Masonic organizations: Red Cross of Constantine (RCC) and the Societus Rosicruciana in Angelia (SRIA), which exist to this day. He was also involved in one way or another in many other Masonic fringe groups and had a solid involvement in both the Symbolic Lodge and Royal Arch Masonry, compiling an interesting Masonic resume before his untimely death as age 39 of tuberculosis.

The first meeting of the then styled Grand Council of the Imperial, Ecclesiastical and Military Order of the Knights of the Red Cross of Rome and Constantine, took place on May 31, 1865. This title was an attempt by Little to link his organization with a much older, non-Masonic one, a religious order in Europe called the Constantinian Order of St. George. This attempt to establish connections to older orders was not unique to Little (Anderson after all linked Freemasonry to ancient Greek and Roman groups in his Constitutions), but Little carried it to extremes. In this case, the St. George group protested, and after a large amount of bad press, Little quietly changed the title to the "Masonic and Military Order of the Knights of Rome and the Red Cross of Constantine".

Another area of duplicity concerned the ritual, which Little also ascribe to much older and reputable sources. In fact, historians tend to agree that William Finch, one of the many degree purveyors that existed in this time period, penned the degree of reception for the Order. It first appeared about 1812, so while a bit older, it was certainly not of historically significant origins. Bro. Arturo de Hoyos has shown that Little used another source penned by one James H. C. Miller, an American version of Finch, for the Knight of Holy Sepulcher and Novice and Knight of St. John Orders.

Notwithstanding its dubious beginnings, the Order expanded rapidly in England, and spread within a decade to Canada (1875), Scotland (1876), and the United States (1873). One of the early charters was given to New York, which established 10 Conclaves (in Rochester, Olean, New York City (2), Norwich, Hornellville, Wellsville, Elmira, Albany, and Brooklyn) and four in New Jersey (Paterson, Bordentown, Jersey City, and Elizabeth) before ceasing to exist around the turn of the 20th century. In fact, of the many charters granted only four remained viable until relatively modern times: Pennsylvania (later styled the Empire of the East), Illinois (later styled the Empire of the West), Vermont, and Maine. In 1958, The Empire of the East and the West merged, becoming the now familiar *United Grand Imperial Council of the Knights of the Red Cross of Constantine and Appendant Orders for the United States, Mexico, and the Philippine's*. Vermont had one independent Conclave, but no Grand Council, and it came under the United Grand Imperial Council in the mid 1990s. Maine remains separate.

At the beginning of the 20th Century, and particularly in the second half of the century, the Order took on new life and evolved into the Order we know today. Interestingly, as various state charters went dormant, both the Empire of the East and of the West chartered new Conclaves in those now unaffiliated states. In New York, the Empire of the East chartered St. Paul's (New York City, 1916), Albany (Albany, 1928), St. Mark's (Buffalo, 1944), and Utica (Utica, 1956), while the Empire of the West chartered, St. Leo's (Syracuse, 1934), and St. Quentin (Garden City, 1939).

Those interested in a fuller history of these events are referred to, "The Order of the Red Cross of Constantine," by Harold V. B. Voorhis, with two caveats. First, Brother Voorhis attention to detail is admirable, but his writing style makes for a boring read. This is a book perhaps best used for research into specific areas of interest rather than a front to back read. Secondly, the book covers the history of the Order until 1961, thus leaving out our own time period. It should be noted Bro. Voorhis produced a similar history of the Societus Rosicruciana.

Today's Red Cross of Constantine

None of the histories of the Order I have found answer this question: What was Little's intention in creating it? Certainly, there was a readily market in 1865 for more Masonic organizations. Was he just responding to market demand? There was an interest in creating Christian Masonic organizations. Was this Little's interest, as well. Little became the center of attention in these new organizations. Did he merely crave attention? Some aspects of his personality argue for a baser motive, but, in fact, this is likely to continue as another unsolved Masonic mystery.

Whatever Little's intention, he would be happy to know the modern Red Cross of Constantine has become a premier Masonic group and has been so for some time. The most senior members of St. Mark's Conclave have 43 years in the Order as of this year and undoubtedly have witness some changes but would have viewed the organization as premier for their entire tenure.

Why is this so?

Perhaps the most important reason is its exclusivity. As an invitational group, candidates can be selected from the most active and most accomplished Masons of any particular time. While there is, of course, occasionally an unworthy initiate or worth a candidate passed over, there is predisposition to seek out Masons who further the interests of any organization to which they belong.

This exclusivity allows the current movers and shakers of their Masonic communities to meet in an relatively informal setting, often over a good meal, to discuss important Masonic matters of the day, and also allows up and coming younger members to access older members who, although they may not be so active anymore, have, as the saying goes, been there and done that.

Another point in its favor is that the meeting schedules are less time consuming both in preparation and execution. They provide generally for 3-5 meetings a year, in which some are sure to be purely social events. In the formal meetings themselves, the business is really quite limited, the ritual is short and to the point, but, one might argue, not trivial.

We might pause at this point and consider the ritual of reception.

First, it should be pointed out that because the ritual doesn't have much antiquity, and moreover was written with a profit motive, doesn't necessarily make it bad. A great deal of great literature is written with a profit motive by the author. Many Freemasons throughout our history have been enamored of historically connecting our tradition to ancient traditions. Modern historians have pretty much determined the timelines of Freemasonry, although we still lack details in many cases as to how certain organizations came about. The oldest occurrence of Freemasonry is currently thought to be in late 16th century Scotland, and, of course, the Red Cross dates, ritual included, at best, to the early 19th century. What is really important isn't a direct historical connection, but a philosophical connection to other traditions.

Overall, the ritual is a fine piece of work. It has a bit of a different cadence than commonly found in more mainstream Masonic ritual that provides some mystery in itself. Despite a significant content, it is remarkably efficient, take somewhere between 30-45 minutes to confer. Yet it offers a lustration, a journey motif, a knighting, and a centerpiece oration. The penalties of the obligation are also unique to the message of the Order, that to violate this particular trust goes beyond physical torment - it denies the Knight Companion the internalization of Freemasonry i.e. he becomes dead to the message, unable to hear the voice or see the light. I have often thought of this ritual as a refined and concentrated dose of the Rose Croix ritual and it is certainly more directly Christian in its interpretation.

It is difficult to say how much of the foregoing was planned at the onset of the Order, but I think that the practice of exclusivity and efficiency have always been in place at the New York Conclaves, including, St. Mark's.

To conclude this address, I'd like to provide a few demographic details concerning St. Mark's. St. Mark's was chartered on March 25, 1944 by the then Empire of the East. Although it was allowed up to 100 Knight Companions at any given time, it never approached this number in its early history despite the high number of Masons in Western New York. Its jurisdiction was, and continues to be, from Jamestown to Rochester. A few years ago, the membership limit was reduced from 100 to 80, and membership currently stands at 76. A quick review of the Knight Companions shows 7 Grand Masters, 5 Grand High Priests, 3 Grand Masters of the Council of R&SM, 6 Grand Commanders, 6 Active Members of Supreme Council AASR, 2 Deputies of the Supreme Council, 41 Knight Companions that hold a 33°, two Intendant Generals (and an additional honorary one), and one Grand Sovereign. The most senior living Knight Companions are Earle J. Hino and Lester G. Weinheimer, both initiated on October 25, 1975.

In preparing this address, the Recorder and I found that the records of St. Mark's are not readily organized for historical inquiry. If this is also the case with other Conclaves, there is a bit of good news. Efforts are underway to digitize the Proceedings of the various Grand Bodies of the Red Cross of Constantine and make them available on-line. This will provide us with the ability to identify Past Sovereigns and Intendant Generals, and will undoubtedly give some view into the general membership and important events of local Conclaves, as well.